

hailing on you

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by [Drhair76](#)

Summary

"Can I see the injury?" The woman asks, voice gentle. "Just to make sure that it isn't more serious than a bruise."

Wilbur's eyes flicker over to them. "Uh – " he swallows. "Um, yes. Sure. If – if you have to."

And then she helps him peel off his hoodie. And then his shirt. And Technoblade's throat goes dry.

Wilbur is covered in bruises. And usually, Techno knows, that's hyperbole, but no – this is honest. There's no blowing up the blue and black mottling his back, or his side, or his arm. His injured shoulder is actually the only part of him that's not marked up, and Techno is guessing that once the pain sets in, it won't stay that way for long.

This, Techno thinks, is much, much more than he was expecting, and much, much more than he was ready to deal with.

or, Wilbur Soot is a hockey player being treated awfully by his team. Techno is team captain of SMP, Phil's team, and he does Not like what he sees.

Notes

haha obligatory reminder that i don't play hockey :) love u

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that.

- E.B White, *Charlotte's Web*

...

"*jolie s'il vous plaît puis-je avoir de l'eau?*"

James looks over. Raises an eyebrow. "You brought your own water, didn't you? Drink that."

Wilbur, determined, squints down at his *English-to-French pocket dictionary* and flips pages frantically. "Uh- uhhh- *mais je suis si gentille et tu m'aimes.*"

"I don't care how nice you are. Or how much I love you. This is mine."

Wilbur pouts, then droops until his head is against James' back; all dramatic and floppy like the lack of water has taken away his bones. "Do you give up?" James asks, barely resisting the urge to smile fondly. "You're not gonna be able to speak French this whole field trip. Eventually you're going to say something that I haven't learned and then you'll have no one else to talk to."

He opens his mouth to respond, but some kids from their class walk by, see Wilbur with his little dictionary and his bright pink sweatshirt and his wrists covered in hand-made bracelets, and titter to themselves. Wilbur flushes and ducks, ashamed.

James huffs to himself. "Wil, how do you say hockey puck in French?"

He slowly hunts through the book. "Um. *Rondelle de hockey.*"

"Okay, what about stick?"

"*Crosse de hockey.*"

"Okay, now what about those people are fucking idiots and don't know Spanish from Russian and they're probably going to go nowhere in life so don't mind them ?"

Wilbur closes his book and sighs. "James."

"Wilbur," James repeats mockingly.

Wilbur smiles a little. "You're stupid. I want to see the giraffes."

"Okay," James passes him his water. "I'm going to the bathroom, I expect that full sentence to be translated by the time I get back."

Wilbur salutes with a giggle. "Yes sir."

Wilbur joined his first ever *real* hockey team when he was five years old.

He felt really, really important; getting a whole stick to himself to look after and a bag and little pads to cover his knees. Of course, they were all five, so they never really practiced – they spun around on the ice, learning how to place their hands and every day was more falling than actual playing, but Wilbur still loved it.

He loved going to practice and seeing his friends. He liked that they were all made to do stuff together. He liked that they all got along. After his first week, he came home from practice, proud, not because he was finally learning how to move with the stick and not fall over, but because he memorized every single one of his teammates names *and* their favorite colors.

He had ten friends who played hockey the same way that he did and he *loved* them.

And then his parents got divorced.

Wilbur doesn't remember much of it now, but he does remember moving and having to leave behind most of his hockey friends. (Later, Wilbur would come to realize that just because you share the same hobby as someone, did not mean that they deserved your heart. But that would be later. Much, much later.)

For now, Wilbur is in first grade and he's got a Thomas the Tank engine lunchbox and no friends. He sits alone: at lunch, during recess, when he waits for the bus after-school. He's just – alone. The only time that he *isn't* alone is when he's on the ice, and there, they're running drills.

Still, it's where he laughs the most, so it makes sense that he finds himself looking forward to practice when he wakes up every day. It's the best part of his day.

At least, until James transfers in.

James showed up a month into the school year looking like a person who did not care that it *was* a month into the school year. He walked into their first class of the day, was introduced, saw an empty spot next to Wilbur, shrugged and sat down.

"Hi," he said. "I'm James. I'm new."

"Um, hello. I'm Wilbur."

"Wilbur. That means wild boar, you know. They're supposed to be the strongest animals."

"Thank you?" Wilbur frowned. He wasn't the best judge of what was an insult and what wasn't. Being the strongest didn't seem like an insult, but an animal?

"You're welcome." James nodded. "They're also very resolute too. I wish this class was reading. I hate math."

"I do too." Actually, Wilbur hated most of his classes, but that was because none of the kids in them seemed to want anything to do with him. He guessed math and reading were *fine*.

"What's your favorite book? Mine is James and the Giant Peach, duh."

"I don't...have one."

James squinted at him, humming. "You probably like Charlotte's web," he decided after a moment. "There's a pig named Wilbur. You'd probably be like him."

"Maybe," he said, just to say something. Unsure about everything. The fluke of James sitting here, befriending him – the last thing Wilbur wanted to do is cut it short before James realized that Wilbur is *not* someone that people are friends with.

People just don't like him.

Surprisingly, however, James followed Wilbur to their next class. And the next, and the next. In all of them, there is an empty seat right next to Wilbur and James fills it. And when they get to lunch, and James has the choice of sitting wherever he wants, James sat down next to him.

All of a sudden, they were inseparable, and Wilbur realized, *oh, it's not quite so bad being alone as long as you do it with someone else.*

...

It's fifth grade, and everything matters.

They're about to go to middle school and Wilbur has the sinking suspicion that James will be his only friend for the rest of his life.

"That's statistically impossible," James says, reaching over to Wilbur's tray and taking the apple slices that he never eats. "You're gonna get friends from work. Also, you play hockey, so they count."

They don't, and James knows it, but Wilbur doesn't say anything. "I think it's funny how you talk about statistics like you're any better at math than when we first met."

"I'm a *bit* better."

Wilbur doesn't answer.

"*I am!*" Again, silence. James huffs. "Well, how about we actually try to make friends with someone, then?"

Internally, Wilbur curls up. "No, I don't think – no."

And then, as if on cue, Shelby Shubble sits down next to them in a huff, slamming her notebook and pencil case down and crossing her arms over her chest.

James and Wilbur exchange a look. James goes to open his mouth and Shubble snaps, "don't you *dare* tell me to move or else I will hit you square in the face."

James closes his mouth. He kicks Wilbur under the table. When Wilbur looks at him, he's making faces at Shubble and then back. *Go on*, he's saying, with his stupid eyebrows. *Go and talk.*

"Hi," he says awkwardly. If only to avoid James kicking him again. "You seem...upset."

"Well," she exclaims, "I'm glad that *someone* seems to notice. I *am* upset. Mr. Dewey decided that Gwendolyn and I should be paired for this year's science fair. I tried telling him that she's literally evil and kicks puppies in her spare time, and he told me that I used the word *literally* wrong. Then I tried to tell him that she doesn't know a bunsen burner from a microscope and she'll *ruin* my project and he told me I needed to learn to get *along* with people."

They both blink at her, processing.

"Well," James says after a moment, "he is right. You did use literally wrong."

She glares at him so hard that Wilbur waits for him to catch on fire. He doesn't, but just barely.

"What's your science project about?" Wilbur blurts, because he doesn't know much about having mortal enemies, but he knows that science is cool. And if Shubble likes that, maybe she'll stay to talk about it.

And stop scaring them.

Shubble eases, just a little. "Well, I wanted to study the growth of mushrooms and the different ways that the environment can affect them. But Gwen thinks mushrooms are disgusting."

"What?" Wilbur frowns. "What's wrong with mushrooms? They're cool."

"I know right!" Shubble exclaims loudly. Wilbur blinks. She turns pink, sheepish. "Sorry, I just – I love science. And it isn't fair that I have to work with her. She's probably gonna make me build a stupid volcano."

Wilbur glances over to James. James' eyes widen. He starts shaking his head, frantic, but Wilbur is already turning back to Shubble, his mind made up. James said to make a friend – well, this is how it happens.

"Why don't you work with us? I want to learn about mushrooms with you."

Shubble's eyes widen. James facepalms. "Really? You would?"

"Yeah, that sounds like fun. And this way, there's no Gwendolyn."

"No Gwendolyn," Shubble repeats dreamily. "Alright! Let's do it!"

And just like that, James and Wilbur's lonesome duo became a trio.

...

In highschool, James and Shubble learn the rules of hockey. Wilbur explains it, and they come to his matches and watch, trying to understand. Every time Wilbur gets off the ice, James says the exact same thing – *I don't know why you'd willingly do that to yourself. Good job though.*

When they graduate, Wilbur has to find a new team. He finds Hypixal. They're local, and the coach is known to be diligent, and Wilbur won't admit it, but he feels like half of him is missing when he doesn't have a jersey.

Thankfully, Hypixal takes him. He feels better dressed in their maroon and black, so he ignores the coach's remarks about how lucky Wilbur is that he took him in, he ignores the way the coach recruits players taller and older and disregards him, he ignores the way that they knock him around in practices.

I'm turning this team into a national team, his coach says, *suck it up or get thrown out.*

The first game where his coach pulls him aside and tells him to put their largest player in the penalty box, Wilbur's hands are shaking. He's inches shorter and is so panicked that he doesn't remember to raise his arms to block the hit. When he hits the ice, a hush falls over the crowd, but when he picks himself up he doesn't see anything but his coach's approving nod.

You're good at this, his coach says later, and Wilbur doesn't dare disagree.

It goes on like that for a year. They play harder and harder teams, and when it gets close, his coach sends Wilbur out to put their hardest hitter in the penalty box. James doesn't understand, and Wilbur doesn't have the words to explain. Wilbur doesn't even think he's playing hockey anymore – every game is a boxing match, and sometimes it doesn't end after the whistle blows.

Sometimes, especially if they pull off the win, the other team find him after the game. Sometimes, the couple of hits on the ice aren't the only bruises he's left with when he goes home.

"Wilbur," Shubble begs, watching him ice his black eye, "this isn't right. What's going on? You can't – this isn't hockey."

Wilbur turns away, trying not to cry. James is quiet in the corner, having had this same argument with Wilbur for months now. "This is hockey, Shubble — you wouldn't get it."

Shubble rolls her eyes. "Don't do that to me, Wilbur. You know perfectly well that I know your sport. You're my best friend. You *watched* us learn the sport just so we could understand what you're doing. We made it our *job* to get it."

Wilbur hunches, curling his arms around his middle. "I'm sorry."

She softens. "I know. Make it up to me by telling me what's going on." He hesitates. "Please," she begs, "tell us."

Wilbur inhales, then exhales, then does it again. On his next breath, he's crying. He tells them everything. He tells them all of it.

They're horrified, and don't have anything to say in response to Wilbur's question: "Why," he sobs, "am I only good when I'm being hurt?"

And so, because he has no other choice, he goes to practice. He goes to games, he trains, he takes hits. He listens when his team members tell him what to do, and he listens when the coach tells him what to do. He listens and he never argues.

Suck it up or get thrown out, his coach said, and Wilbur needs to stay. He has nothing else. So he sucks it up.

He plays with a team that hates him. He sleeps in hotel rooms, all curled up tight, wishing he had someone at his back that he trusts. He's covered in bandaids and bruises and wonders whether his limbs will give out underneath him whenever he stands.

He, despite it all, keeps standing anyway.

Wilbur didn't want food, he wanted love. He wanted a friend - someone who would play with him.

- E.B White, Charlotte's Web

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At Wilbur's very first out of state tournament, he's alone.

He's just turned twenty, and his team, rowdy and loud and all slightly older than him, want nothing to do with him – *still*, after two years of practices and games and trying to prove himself. They go off together in little groups, and Wilbur, who knows a dismissal when he hears it, doesn't dare follow his coach around the facility while he checks out the other teams. So, Wilbur is alone.

He finds refuge in the food courts, setting to nursing a Gatorade and people-watching until the half an hour before their next match is up. He counts the number of strollers he sees (four), then the number of purple jerseys (seven), then the number of dog-print pieces of clothing (a disappointing *two*. And that's *with* counting the bulldog themed socks he wore today).

He's thinking of another thing to count when he sees them walk by.

SMP. One of two teams they're going to be playing against today. Wilbur's coach had them all watch film of their recorded scrimmages and things, so he recognizes most of them. The pink haired one is in front, so Wilbur figures that the shorter blond guy is their coach. They seem a bit disjointed. The way they walk by, as if they're pretending that they're not together. They seem paired off. Wilbur would know – he knows how it looks. His team all pair off without him everyday. But disjoint aside, they still seem tough.

They're tall and walk like they're at least assured of their own strength. Wilbur has to cringe at the broadness of the biggest one's shoulders. Getting hit by that will not be fun. But that's his job, so – he curls up tight in his seat, relishing his own relatively unhurt body while he still can.

...

Schlatt does not like Technoblade.

There are almost too many reasons to list out, but –

The man is bossy and strict and clearly the coach's favorite no matter how many times Phil says that he doesn't have one. He never comes out of a game and never breaks a rule and never lets anyone else do so either. The man, for as rowdy as this sport is, is tightly coiled and it *unnerves* Schlatt.

His last team were a bunch of younger guys, and they all looked to him, nervous and shaky like little lambs. Schlatt was the tough guy, the one who beer and convinced them to relax and got to get into it with anyone that bothered them. It didn't necessarily matter that he didn't like the taste of beer, or that he never felt responsible enough to deal with a group of people that looked up to him – that was who they thought he was, so that was who he had to be.

Now, though, on SMP, there isn't any of that.

Their youngest member is Sapnap, and the dude is as cool as anything. He's friends with everyone, and doesn't need validation or direction. In fact, the guy is almost as hard-headed as Schlatt, pushing back on Techno's lead, testing all the boundaries that are being set just because he can. The only person that he seems genuinely bothered by is George, who, no matter what, he can't get a rise out of. Schlatt on the other hand, knows not to cross that guy, and instead pokes his way around Techno any chance that he gets.

Techno is very much decidedly their team captain, so Schlatt follows his instructions even when he desperately doesn't want to. Otherwise, he'll be out of a team.

So because of this, they started the match normally.

Hypixel played dirty and scrappy, and were still down despite. They checked hard, and didn't even get the puck *close* to their net. Quackity was too fast for them to catch and Sapnap was too accurate when shooting for them to block him.

It should've been a clean game.

"Don't hit back," Techno orders during a time-out where Sapnap complains of being busted against the rink walls for no reason. "We don't hit back like that. That isn't Phil's game. We hit back in the score."

"Which will make them more mad which will make them hit us more?" Quackity frowns.

"Hopefully refs call what they see once they start spinning out," Techno says.

"We're just gonna fucking *hope*?" Schlatt asks, incredulous. "That's our fucking game plan? We're getting banged up and you just want to hope that it stops?"

Fact about Techno: he never glares. He never glares, he never yells, he never snaps in anger. He's calm and cool and collected. He's everything that Schlatt is not. So when he turns that cool look onto him, Schlatt can feel his *insides* bristle up.

"Yes." He says. "That's my call. I expect you to follow it."

Sapnap opens his mouth to say something, but George, who hasn't spoken yet, just knocks his stick against the boards and goes out onto the ice. Quackity follows, and Sapnap rolls his eyes, also following.

Schlatt doesn't move, just *looking* at Techno.

"You got something to say, Schlatt?" Techno asks. The words are fighting, but his tone is infuriatingly calm.

"No," Schlatt spits, then pushes onto the ice. He pulls his helmet down.

Schlatt is not a calm person. He holds grudges and stores anger and *hates*. Especially if he's told to be calm, he will not. So, in the first play after the time-out, he, with anger like coals in his stomach, finds one player – with wide brown eyes and stupid fluffy hair – and knocks his shoulder against him for all Schlatt's worth.

The guy goes spinning out, dropping his stick and immediately gasping, curling a hand over the spot where he was hit. It didn't feel as good as Schlatt thought it would. He even regrets it slightly when he hears the kid's panting, but that regret fades instantly when the kid straightens and pushes into him, two hands on Schlatt's chest, starting a fight.

"Fuck you," he says, and yeah, maybe his voice is a little too shaky to mean it, and maybe Schlatt should know better than to fight someone when they're up by so much, but he's got fire in his veins and Techno is across the ice with that *stupid* cool gaze and Schlatt *needs* this.

He drops his stick.

Schlatt shoves back, jutting his own shoulder against the guy, and again, he crumples, curving inward like he's never fought before. Like he only knows how to get taken down. Schlatt goes in again, but this time, hands catch him, holding him back.

George and Techno, wrangling him in.

"Are you psycho?" George hisses, yanking his arm. "That wasn't even a good *play*. What is wrong with you?"

Techno doesn't speak, but the silence says a lot. Ahead of them is Quackity, reaching down to help the player off the ice, which Schlatt doesn't register until later as being weird.

Why is the team that hurt the guy the first ones to help him up off the floor?

...

"I said one thing," Techno says, later in the locker room. "I said one thing and I was *perfectly* clear when I said it."

Schlatt, sitting on the bench with half his gear off, resists the urge to roll his eyes. "The kid decided to start a fight over one measly hit, that isn't my fucking fault."

"I said no *checks*."

"If they're hitting *us* –"

"We were up, Schlatt. There was no reason whatsoever to do that."

"I think there *is* a reason," Sapnap cuts in suddenly. "If they're hitting us –"

"What," George says coolly. "You can't take a hit now?"

Sapnap gashes his teeth together. "You know what? I'm fucking done with you, man. You're all talk and no action. Come on. Hit me, pretty boy. I didn't see anyone checking *you* in that game."

George's eyes glint dangerously.

Personally, Schlatt would never fuck with someone who looks like that. No matter what they *seem* to be, if a person looks like *that* when challenged, then you stay the fuck away from them.

"Stop." Techno says loudly. George eases. Sapnap huffs. But Schlatt isn't impressed.

"Why shouldn't they go at it?" He asks. "Why should they listen to you? A team captain who cares more about what his coach thinks of him than the *safety* of his own?"

"You're gonna pretend like this is about safety?" Techno asks, raising an eyebrow. "That's what you're gonna do?"

"We were getting *hit*."

The door opens then, and Quackity skitters in, shoulders hunched. Phil follows him, expression hard. Techno straightens.

"If you're getting hit, you can choose not to hit back," Phil says. He pats Quackity's shoulder lightly, but when he speaks to them, his voice is clearly disappointed. "Schlatt, you shouldn't have encouraged that fight. That first check, I'll let it slide, I understand your frustration, but you had the upper hand to not hit back after that. I expect you to find that player and apologize to him after we're done here."

Schlatt resists the urge to sigh. "Alright."

"With Techno." Phil adds, and Schlatt balks.

"I don't need a babysitter!"

"Who said Techno was a babysitter?" Phil looks at him, skeptical. "Techno is this team's captain. This is just as much his fault as it's yours."

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Techno slump slightly. Of course Techno wouldn't argue with Phil – the day he does, someone better check to make sure he doesn't have *head trauma*.

"Yes coach," Schlatt grits.

...

Techno hates disappointing Phil.

He's only done it a handful of times, and every time he's been able to set things right. It never affects their relationship, but still, every time is like the first time; a bite of shame so hot hits him that he wishes he could go back in time and fix whatever it was that went wrong. Thankfully, Phil is the kind of person who values setting things right, and if Techno is good at anything, it's conflict resolution.

Well, he thinks, glancing over at Schlatt, who is walking beside him, stewing in silent anger, *some* conflict resolution.

"We should check the trainer's again," Techno says, breaking the silence.

A breath comes out of Schlatt's nose. "I already told you. A guy like that wouldn't go to the trainer. He's gonna be somewhere in here, licking his own wounds. Guys who lose ice fights don't *go* to the trainer."

"That's toxic," Techno remarks.

"Well, we can't all be healthy can we." Schlatt rolls his eyes. "Not all of us have had a goody-two shoes coach since we were *eleven*."

Techno inhales very, very slowly.

He can't quite pin-point what Schlatt's issue with him is. At first, he thought it was the dynamic – Techno is decidedly the team captain. That much won't change, and Schlatt, other than last game, listens pretty well to instructions on the ice. Then, he thought it was his relationship with Phil. Phil's been coaching him since Techno was in *grade* school. Honestly, the man was more father to him than his actual parents, and he knows from the large rotation of team members he's had over the years, that it can irk some people. They can be jealous of how close he and Phil are. But even with that, Schlatt never *tries* to be Phil's favorite.

Ultimately, it has to just be *him*. There's something about Techno that Schlatt can't stand, and that's the one thing that Techno can't alter.

Getting angry at him won't do anything, so Techno doesn't bother. He doesn't want to fight with Schlatt, and he has no proof of this, but he's sure that Schlatt doesn't want to fight with him either.

"You can learn," Techno says simply.

Schlatt looks like he wants to argue that point, but then they walk by a row of lockers and see a lone figure sitting on the bench. He's moving slowly, having taken off his jersey and replaced it with a hoodie. All his gear is off, and without it he kind of looks...small. Techno doesn't know if Schlatt sees what he sees, but he watches Schlatt's throat bob and imagines that he does.

"Hey," he says, and the guy's head snaps up. He fumbles, shoving these circular glasses over his widening eyes. When he gets a clear view of who it is, the guy stands on shaky legs and backs up so he can properly see them both. Fuck. He must be pissed.

"Wh— what do you want?" He asks.

"I'm Schlatt," Schlatt says, pressing a palm to his chest. "You probably know, but I'm the guy who kinda...fucked you up out there."

Techno resists the urge to groan. What a great start to an apology.

"I came to find you 'cause out on the ice, I wasn't acting like myself." He continues. "That fight was...shitty. And if I'd been acting right, it wouldn't have happened like that."

The guy doesn't speak, just watching them both with his brown eyes blown huge, still shaking.

"Hey," Schlatt says again. "You hearing me, man? Did I knock your brain loose or something?"

And then Schlatt, with his brows furrowed, takes a step forward. The guy jerks backwards, pressing against the locker, sliding along the locks to keep the bench between them like a barrier. Techno's heart drops.

"Sorry," the kid blurts. "Sorry. I shouldn't have hit you, I just – please don't hurt me. *Please.*"

Schlatt stops still. Techno, a bit behind him, suddenly understands.

Oh , he thinks, that shake – it isn't anger. It isn't left-over adrenaline. It's fear.

Techno reaches forward and yanks Schlatt back. The man, stunned, doesn't bother fighting when he's pulled. "We're not gonna hurt you." Techno promises. "My name's Techno. What's yours?"

The guy is quiet for a moment, eyes flickering between them two. His hands, trembling, curl up into fists at his sides. He doesn't believe them. It's clear to see. He's willing to fight his way out if he has to.

Techno takes a deep breath.

Phil told him to come here to make sure that Schlatt makes things right. But whatever they've stumbled onto doesn't seem like it'll be made right with one conversation. Whatever's going

on needs time and space – if Techno wants to fix this, then this interaction will be a foundation, and he has to start it out well.

"Here," Techno says, stepping aside. Schlatt goes to protest, but Techno knocks into him lightly, shutting him up. "We'll leave, alright? We just wanted to come and say sorry for what happened out there, but if you want us to leave, then we will. If you ask us to get out of your space, then we will."

"Blade –" Schlatt starts, but Techno ignores him.

"What do you want, kid?"

He seems confused. Honestly, truly confused, but his shoulders lower and his hands unfurl.

"You'd leave if I asked?" He asks, voice small.

"Yes," Techno nods.

"You're – you're *sorry*?"

Techno looks over at Schlatt. Schlatt sighs, but nods. "Yeah, man. I'm sorry."

"But..." he stops. "But it's just part of the game."

Techno internally winces, wary. Schlatt was *just* talking about this. This is basically an *I told you so* ready and waiting for him to snatch up.

Instead, Schlatt frowns. "You know you don't box, right kid?"

He frowns. "My name isn't kid."

"Okay, whatever – Hypixal."

He winces. "I think – I think I'd prefer kid."

"The *point*," Schlatt says. "You don't box. So you don't *need* to fight. And maybe you were pissed, I get it, but I shouldn't have kept it going, so that one is on me. I'm sorry, man. I didn't want to hurt you and I feel bad that I did."

There's a bit of quiet as the kid processes.

"Wilbur." He says suddenly. They both startle. "My name," he clarifies. "Not kid. And – and I'm not my team. My name is Wilbur."

"That's unfortunate," Schlatt mumbles. Techno hits him.

"Well, my last name is Soot, so. It could be worse." He says, and Schlatt laughs a little. Then, Wilbur frowns. "You really didn't mean to hurt me? Like...really?"

He sounds so... *surprised*. As if everyone he's ever met on the ice has been targeting him. It makes Techno's stomach hurt.

"Nah. Soot, if I wanted to, then you'd know it. I don't have any grudge against you. You've done nothing wrong to me. I don't have a reason to hurt you."

"People shouldn't take the chance to hurt you," Techno cuts in. "That's not what this sport is for."

"Oh." Wilbur frowns. "Oh."

Techno's heart twinges. "Let us take you to get an ice pack. As an apology." He says impulsively.

Schlatt throws him a look, but Techno resolutely ignores it. Something about this guy makes Techno want to help. His only thought is this: Phil would.

"You don't have to," Wilbur protests, but then he bends down to pick up his bag, and hisses in pain. Schlatt glares, and despite his talk about *tough guys not going to the trainer* or whatever, he steps over and takes Wilbur's bag before he can. "Hey!"

"You need ice," Schlatt says firmly, pointing a finger at Wilbur's chest. "Someone's got to make sure you didn't pull anything when –"

"When you beat my ass?" Wilbur finishes, all snarky and antagonistic, but Schlatt doesn't fall for the bait.

"Yeah," he says simply. "When I beat your ass."

Wilbur wilts a bit, sighing, clearly registering he's on the losing side. "Alright. Whatever. Can I have my bag back, at least?"

Schlatt smirks, then hikes the strap up on his shoulder. "Nope."

Technoblade wonders if this is how he was with the guys in his old team. He finds himself wishing that Schlatt could be like *this* instead of the prickly, constantly snapping person he is with them. Either way, Wilbur follows when they lead him away. Apparently, Schlatt keeping the bag was a pretty good call, because Wilbur starts shuffling nervously when the trainer's office comes into view, as if he wants to run.

"It's just the trainer," Techno says gently. The look in Wilbur's eyes makes it seem like they're sending him to the gallows. "We're just getting ice."

Wilbur mumbles something to himself and crosses his arms over his chest.

They stand in the doorway when the trainer ushers Wilbur further into the room and asks him what's wrong. Wilbur shrugs, then winces, and admits that his shoulder aches a little, *can he please have some ice for it?* The way he asks, his expression – it connects parts of an image in Techno's mind, and honestly, he's not sure he wants to see the picture in its entirety.

"Can I see the injury?" The woman asks, voice gentle. "Just to make sure that it isn't more serious than a bruise."

Wilbur's eyes flicker over to them. "Uh – " he swallows. "Um, yes. Sure. If – if you have to."

And then she helps him peel off his hoodie. And then his shirt. And Technoblade's throat goes dry.

Wilbur is covered in bruises. And usually, Techno knows, that's hyperbole, but no – this is honest. There's no blowing up the blue and black mottling his back, or his side, or his arm. His injured shoulder is actually the only part of him that's *not* marked up, and Techno is guessing that once the pain sets in, it won't stay that way for long.

This , Techno thinks, is much, much more than he was expecting, and much, much more than he was ready to deal with.

"What the fuck?" Schlatt goes, dropping Wilbur's bag in shock. He would've stepped forward had Techno not grabbed him. Wilbur still tenses and shrinks, eyes flickering down. "I – I couldn't have done all of that. What the – where the hell did those come from?"

"Hockey," Wilbur says shortly, more to the trainer than to them. She doesn't seem all that stunned by the marks, instead just resigned. "I'm – I'm clumsy. That's all."

"Clumsy doesn't do that." Schlatt insists, gesturing to a divot bruise at his ribs that looks suspiciously like the end of a hockey stick. And Techno, silently, has to agree – besides, he saw Wilbur on his skates in that game. He's not clumsy. Not at all. Shaky, sure, but not clumsy.

Wilbur ignores him and the trainer sighs. "You need to be more careful," she reprimands lightly. Wilbur's cheeks color. "We get a lot of players that simply throw their bodies around, and after a while, they think they can just come in here and get patched up. It's a vicious cycle. If it keeps happening, I'm gonna have to tell you to go on the next time you come here and I don't want to do that."

What? Techno thinks, horrified. What the hell?

"What the fuck?" Schlatt says. "You can just do that?"

She looks apologetic. "It's standard. There are a lot more players than you think trying to take advantage of this facility, so we have to nip it in the bud when we get the chance."

But look at him, Techno wants to scream. Look at him. How can you think he's trying to take advantage of anything?

Wilbur's head dips like he's expected this though – as if he's heard it before. She wraps up some ice for him and watches him pull on his shirt and take the ice without a word. When he brushes by, his bag back in his arms, he's got a wry twist to his lips.

"This is why I don't go to the trainer," he says. "But thanks for the ice. And, you know, not wanting to hurt me. It's nice. I like it."

And then he disappears into the crowd.

The rest of the tournament goes on without a hitch. They don't see Wilbur again.

They do, however, see him at the next one. And the next one. And the next.

Time and time again, they find him in food courts, or empty rinks, or lingering in halls by power outlets. He brightens when he sees Techno and Schlatt, and slowly but surely, whenever they step into a new arena, Techno automatically finds himself looking for a familiar head of brown hair and round glasses.

He's always in a corner somewhere, by himself, and Techno decides to purposefully ignore how he's always dressed dutifully in his team hoodie without a single glimpse of a team to be seen.

When they slip off to find Wilbur, Quackity follows. Then Sapnap. Then George. Suddenly, Wilbur's met their whole team. They hang out together in food courts all across the state at the tournaments that they're both put into.

Techno and Wilbur exchange numbers, and Techno texts when he knows about another game or set or competition. Wilbur, on the other hand, starts anticipating the games and matches, even with the inevitable pain that follows.

The loneliness that lingers fades as he sits and listens to Sapnap and Schlatt argue about nonsense, or listens to Quackity explain why he *needs* to buy Maryland flag patterned socks. He laughs with them, eats with them, and offers Techno or George one of his earbuds and shows them all his favorite bands.

The most surprising thing of all is how they find him even when he's just finished a match. When he's staying back behind in the locker room, limping or pressing a water bottle to his aching arm. When he's too tired to get up, so he sits there, his forehead against the cool metal of the locker, and his knuckles smarting with bruises on-coming.

Techno, somehow, always finds him. Pressed into the deepest corners, or when he feels as small and slight as dust. Without question, he brings bags of ice, or bottles of water – one time George carefully wraps his ankle without a single word, his hands ever-gentle, even though Wilbur is sure he's seen the man bully his way through people three times his size.

The whole team is like that. They sit with him even when he's broken, and don't mind when he can't manage words to pay back for their company.

It's nice – it's almost like what he imagined a real hockey team would be when he was five and friendless. He desperately wishes he could have them always like this.

...

Techno is going to make a request.

Phil knows it from the moment he books the hotel room tickets, from the moment he passes around game schedules and tells them all their curfew times. There's a distracted wrinkle in

Techno's forehead that tells Phil that he needs something.

Post practice meeting, Quackity tugs Sapnap out onto the ice with a grin, and Schlatt follows, looking to swipe the puck out from under them, but Phil lingers, letting Techno collect his thoughts. He'll speak when he's ready – Phil didn't spend years drilling into Techno's head that he's here for anything just for nothing.

"Phil?" Techno asks as Phil is sliding his clipboard into his bag. "Can I ask a question?"

"Of course, Tech." Phil sits down on the bench, giving the man his full attention. Techno still looks distracted, frowning to himself.

"At our next tournament, would you mind doing a little bit of recruiting?" Phil winces, opening his mouth. Techno must see the *no* coming, because he hurries to keep talking. "Just this once – I know you don't like doing it, but it would just be the one time and I –"

"Techno," Phil chides gently. Techno stops. Slumps.

For the most part, Techno is right. Phil doesn't recruit. He doesn't like doing it. He's had coaching come and poach his kids before and it's never a good feeling, getting the rug swept out from under him like that. In fact, the last kid he ever recruited was Quackity, but that was a completely different story, as he was looking for a team from out of the country.

"You say that I dislike recruiting, and you're right," Phil says. "But that isn't all of it, Tech. I've seen teams where the coaches only look to recruit the best, catering to their skills and leaving their own loyal players behind. Where, instead of working with their kids and investing the proper time into making them all strong as a unit, they pit all their hopes into one single star. A team is more than just one person, and if I go recruiting players I think are *stronger* than what will that say about my coaching? What will that tell your teammates? What will they think *I think* about their abilities?"

"I know," Techno says softly. "I know. But – Phil, this isn't about skill. Not really. Our team is good. Great, even. I don't think any of them can be replaced, even if they're hard to deal with sometimes."

"Okay, then what – "

"There's this guy." Techno sits down on the bench next to him. His frown is so deep that it's giving him lines. "He's – I mean, you've seen him. At the last tournament, we were sitting, waiting for our game. He was on the ice."

Phil's brows furrow as he tries to remember.

"He was playing like an enforcer; laying himself out for his teammates even though he had the speed and stick-skill to score."

Ah. The player's image easily comes to mind now.

Tall but skinny, he moved on the ice almost as quick as Quackity did, which was impressive considering how much more body he has. Phil was interested in the way he held himself – he

was aggressive, but not in the direction of the goal, and he was impulsive, but not *messy*, and he shook, but had a certain sense of the game that made it easy to tell he acted the way he did purposefully. Nothing he did was accidental, even if he was trying to pass it off as such.

"Is he looking for a new team?" Phil frowns, confused. "A player that plays like that – they're bleeding hearts. You know that. They don't just leave like that."

Techno exhales out his nose. "Yeah, I know. He *should* be looking for a new team. They don't treat him right."

Phil tilts his head, biting back fondness. "Techno, what's going on here? Did this kid even say he was looking for somewhere new to play?"

Techno looks away. "No," he mumbles.

"Then you already know my answer." Phil stands. "If someone wants to switch, they'll have to say something first. They need to ask for it."

"But Phil, he doesn't *know* he's being hurt." Techno pleads. "It's like – it's like he's willing to take it all. He's willing to do anything for the very little they give him. He gets hurt and it's – it's not *healthy*, Phil."

Phil hesitates.

Then, Techno opens his mouth again.

"What if it was me, Phil?" He asks, soft and urgent. "What if that was me, throwing myself against the boards, taking fists to please you? What would you say then?"

"I wouldn't have you do that." Phil says immediately, offended.

"But his coach *does*." Techno stands too. Looks him in his eyes. "Phil, if that was me stuck over there, hurting for people who didn't care, would you save me? Or would you just let me go?"

Phil is quiet.

He's trained Techno since he was small. He's seen Techno's first goal, first block, first championship. He's carried Techno off the ice when he's had a twisted ankle, when he got a concussion, when he tried playing sick. He's been invited to Techno's birthday parties and Christmas dinners and every year, at the end of the season, he gets a letter from him. All of them are in his office at home, tucked away safe in a drawer where Phil can re-read them whenever he wants. Phil was there when Techno wanted to dye his hair pink, when he wanted to become a goalie, even that one weird year where he wanted to try and play football.

For all intents and purposes, Technoblade is as good as his kid, and, when it's put like that, there is no way on Earth that Phil would ever be able to stand by and let this happen.

"I'll...take a look into it," Phil says haltingly. Techno's expression melts into relief. "I make no promises, but I will watch."

They've played all of their games by one in the afternoon, but they don't leave to go back to the hotel, because Wilbur's team is on the schedule.

It takes them a moment to find the rink, so by the time they all sit down, the game's already started. With trained eyes, Phil finds Wilbur's quick moving form, and watches the man keep up a good defense of the left, circling around and around, keeping his area clear. Nothing seems out of place for the first half, and Phil, despite the immense trust he places in Techno everyday, hopes that maybe he was overreacting to some tough plays.

"He's playing good," Schlatt says. He looks more open than Phil's seen him since his first practice – attention entirely on the ice.

"Well," Techno corrects absently, and Phil is pleased to see that Schlatt doesn't snap at him, and they don't descend into arguing. Huh. Interesting. "And yeah, he is. Nothing seems off. Yet."

"What should I be looking for?" Phil asks.

Techno's expression pinches. "He tosses himself around. You could say that's the game, because that's what everyone *else* seems to be okay with saying about it but – I don't know. Something about the way that his team members react to it is...routine."

"Curse of being the tough guy," Schlatt says. It's quiet, almost as if Phil and them aren't supposed to overhear. "No one gives you a second glance when you hit the deck 'cause you're supposed to be picking yourself back up."

"Some of the things Wilbur's said to me about his team are weird too," George speaks up. "I mean, he isn't five, but – they don't include him. They don't listen to him."

"Yeah! He gets really shocked whenever we hear him out about stuff," Quackity cuts in. "But he's so interesting? He knows a lot about a *lot*. Like – do you know how our actual Hockey skates are made?" Phil shakes his head. "He *does* . It's so cool!"

"Cool until I'm wrapping his ankle because he's too scared to go to the trainer on his own," George says, eyes hard.

Phil frowns.

The teams come out of halftime and spill back onto the ice. Wilbur is one of the last people to come out, and even still his coach stops him, grabbing his bicep and whispering something in his ear. Whatever it is, it ends with the man pointing at one of the opposing players, a tall guy almost twice Wilbur's size.

Wilbur's head dips, and he goes out.

Phil doesn't know why he doesn't expect it when a fight breaks out only five minutes later.

Wilbur and the guy his coach pointed at: the guy twice his size, who shoves at Wilbur and pushes him back so hard that he slides. Wilbur throws his stick down, and pushes back,

dropping his shoulder to hit him.

"Why would he – " Phil starts, but Techno shakes his head, his eyes dark.

"His coach told him to. That's why."

Phil, for the life of him, can't imagine why.

Wilbur holds his own well enough – tousling and shoving like a cornered alley-cat, but eventually the bigger guy gets over his shock and remembers his own size. He slams Wilbur up against the boards. Phil is sure that he can hear Wilbur's teeth rattle in his head all the way from here.

He slumps against the wall, and that declares the fight officially over. The teammates swing around to check on the big guy, even though he's pretty much unhurt.

No one comes to check on Wilbur.

They're both guided to their respective penalty boxes. The crowd around them is shouting and jeering, but Phil's eyes are fixed on Wilbur in the box. He clumsily pulls off his helmet, and leans his head back against the glass, eyes fluttering shut.

Phil's chest hurts just to look at him. He looks like the world is on his shoulders, and it's pressing and pressing and pressing, testing him to see how much he can take. In Phil's opinion, it doesn't seem like too much more.

Wilbur's coach doesn't bother passing him a glance and the game goes on.

Techno looks at him.

"You're right," Phil says immediately. "Something is very, *very* wrong over there."

...

After the match, Phil practically orders them to lead him to the locker rooms, because apparently, that's where Wilbur stays after matches.

They pass by his team on the way in, and Phil can practically *hear* Schlatt shaking in anger, but Techno's got a hand on his shoulder, keeping him from jumping at them. No matter, because Wilbur isn't with them anyway, just as they said he wouldn't be.

"Wilbur?" Quackity calls as they round the corner. "Wil, are you here?"

Then he stops short. "Oh no." He whispers, putting his hand over his mouth. Phil can't see with Techno and Schlatt in front of him, but that's taken care of easily when Techno lets go of Schlatt's shoulder and moves, dropping down to the floor by the locker room bench.

Finally Phil can see. And finally Phil understands what people mean when they say ignorance is bliss .

Wilbur is there, on the ground, back pressed against the lockers. His eyes are lidded, and he's pale, which only makes the bruise marring his jaw that much more clear.

"Wil," Techno whispers, fingers flexing like he's unsure of what to do. Wilbur's head lolls towards him, eyelids fluttering.

"Tech?" He goes, breathless.

Phil has no idea if Techno does it on purpose, but he bunches over Wilbur, boxing him in, shielding him with his body, guarding him with his shoulders. "Wilbur, where does it hurt?"

Phil's heart breaks when Wilbur reaches forward with trembling hands. His fingers curl in the front of Techno's hoodie. "Everywhere," he whines, trying to get closer. "Tech, please. Make it stop. I can't – I'm so tired."

His head drops as if he doesn't have the strength to keep it up, and Techno catches it in his hands, cradling it gently. He brushes either thumb along Wilbur's cheekbones, and Wilbur does a full-body shudder.

"I've got you, Wil," Techno says, quiet and firm. "You're with me, alright?"

Tears well up in Wilbur's brown eyes. "You – you're always so gentle with me... it's nice. Please don't stop."

"I won't Wilbur." He chokes. "Never. I will never stop being gentle with you."

Wilbur's eyes flutter again, and them closing causes those tears to slip down his cheeks. It also jolts Phil out of his still.

"The trainer," he manages. "We need to help him to the trainer." But no one moves. In fact, they stop – Quackity shuffles nervously, and George's already tight frown gets tighter. Wilbur whimpers, tucking his face into Techno's collar. "What? What's wrong?"

"We can't take him to the trainer," Sapnap explains haltingly, wincing when he hears himself. "I mean – we *can*, but they – they've got this rule about players who come in always injured. They'll see all his other injuries and they'll think he does this on purpose."

Phil doesn't know *what* feeling it is, but *something* flares up in his chest. It's hot and painful. It *burns*.

"What?" He asks, his voice low and his tone measured.

Sapnap shrinks a bit, but George easily fills in. "They'll start turning him away. It's policy, is what they all keep saying."

Phil closes his eyes and breathes down the fire in his throat. *Phil, Techno said, if that was me over there, hurting for people who didn't care, would you save me, or just let me go?*

He opens his eyes. "Guys, help Wilbur up. We're getting him to the trainer, and if they won't treat him, then I'll fucking do it myself."

Techno startles, but Schlatt, a man of constant action, kneels down easily at Techno's side.

"Let me," he says to Techno. Techno watches him, wary. "I'll be gentle, I promise." Techno shifts to the side, gently nudging Wilbur back. Wilbur's eyes open and flicker over to Schlatt. "Soot."

"Schla't?"

"Yeah." Schlatt swallows. "It's me. Hey, can I take you down to the trainers? Can I let them check you out?"

Discomfort filters over Wilbur's face.

"I'm not—" Schlatt starts. Then stops. Starts again. "I'm not gonna let anything happen, Soot. They won't kick you out. I promise. Let me—" he stops to inhale raggedly. "Let me take care of you, man."

Wilbur watches him for another moment before his head dips again, and Schlatt turns, letting Wilbur latch onto his back. This time, when they leave for the trainer, Phil leads them, his eyes like burning suns and his heart a steady heat.

...

Phil's presence is all it takes for the trainer to check Wilbur out.

He slides off of Schlatt's back, and with a bit of steadyng by Sapnap, is guided over to the cot, where the trainer checks him for a concussion. There's a reason why Techno never wants to cross Phil – other than the fact that he deeply respects and trusts his coach, Phil is *terrifying* when he's mad. The man stands in the corner, arms crossed over his chest, eyes fixed on every move the trainer makes. Techno honestly wouldn't be too surprised to see the guy sweating once he's finished asking Wilbur questions about today's date and his own name.

"No concussion," he reports nervously, eyes bouncing over to Phil and then away again. "It seems though, that he's slightly...out of it. Not the result of any injury, but—"

Surprisingly, George steps forward. Belatedly, Wilbur's eyes track him.

"He's disassociating," George says. Sapnap frowns.

"How do you—"

"I just know." George says sharply. He kneels down in front of Wilbur and puts a hand over his. From where he's standing, Techno can see George squeeze Wilbur's hands lightly. "Wil? Are you with me? Every time I squeeze your hands, I'm gonna count – can you count with me?"

George squeezes once, counts to one, and for a moment it doesn't seem as if Wilbur will join, but then he does, quiet and slow, but getting stronger with every number.

"Thank you," Wilbur whispers when they get to ten. George squeezes once more, the briefest smile flitting over his face.

"How did you know how to do that?" Sapnap asks.

George shrugs. "People who experience a lot of pain and hurt will develop it as a coping mechanism until they find something else that can protect them." He hesitates, then lets his gaze shift to the left, away from them all. "I used to do it when I was a kid. People didn't like me. And they let me know it. Back then, I couldn't fight back." He looks up, locking eyes with Sapnap. "I always got hit first. So now, I don't give them the chance."

Sapnap pales. "Oh."

"Oh," George repeats, mocking. It's a little mean, but mostly just uncomfortable. Sapnap ducks slightly. George turns back to Wilbur. "You alright, Wil?"

Wilbur nods, pressing a hand to his eyes. "I'm tired."

Phil steps into George's spot – it's almost comical how quickly the trainer scoots back to make room. "What happened out there, mate?" Wilbur frowns. "I was watching the match – there was no reason for you two to fight. Did he say something? Did something happen?"

Wilbur shakes his head, as if confused. "No? I just – I don't know. I just did what I was told to do. That's it."

"That's it?"

Quieter now, but still loud enough for them to all hear, he goes, "that's all that I do."

All Techno sees of Phil is the way that his back straightens, but he can instantly tell – Phil's seen enough. He's going to help Wilbur however he can, no matter what. Even break his one rule if he has to.

"Well," Phil pulls out his wallet, and takes out a card. "My name is Phil, and I run SMP. If you'd like a new coach that doesn't just tell you what to do without reason, then you can come hop in at one of our practices. You can come and just sit on the side, even. No pressure. This number is for you to use whenever you feel ready." Then he leans in closer, and speaks slower, as if trying to really make sure that Wilbur understands. "Anytime you need it, okay? Anytime at all. Just call."

Slowly, Wilbur reaches out to take the card.

Practices after that pass, and there's no sign of Wilbur.

They would know, because Schlatt comes in late, rain dripping off his coat, having been standing outside, waiting for Wilbur to show up. Quackity makes sure to text Wilbur the address, just in case he forgot it. Sapnap paces back and forth on the ice, eyes on the door as if they'd open any moment.

Even Techno will admit to being distracted. When running drills, he's just a bit sloppier, he runs just a bit slower, he lets pucks pass him by where he normally doesn't. He knows that they all notice, he can tell by the way that they linger just a bit, throwing each other cautious looks like they want to speak up. Of course, none of them do, but George pulls him aside during a water break, his face relatively impassive.

"You're distracted." He says. Techno sighs shortly.

"You're not?"

George doesn't respond. But his lips tighten ever-so slightly. There's Techno's answer.

"I feel like I'm split in two different places —" Techno admits. "I can't stop wondering where Wilbur is. How he's doing. If he's with that —" He stops himself before he can say the word *team*. The way that they barely glance over at Wilbur when he's down, the way that they seem to get amusement from his cries, the way they leave him on his own after matches — none of that screams team to Techno. "If he's with them."

George is quiet, thinking. Then, he reaches a hand out to squeeze Techno's shoulder. "You worry. Be distracted. I'll stay here until you come back to us, alright?"

"Sorry," Techno says, wishing he could be in both mental spaces at once. His team deserves all of him — that was the commitment that he made when he was assigned team captain. But Wilbur...God, Wilbur deserves the world. All Techno can do is give half of himself over and hope Wilbur meets him the rest of the way.

"Don't say sorry." George says. "Just tell me when you need me."

"What if I don't say?"

George tilts his head slightly. He studies Techno. "Then I'll know. That's my job."

...

A downside to finding something good: you immediately start to notice all of the bad that you were used to. And once you start noticing, it's hard to stop.

Wilbur's never despised practice before. He's never thought of practice as something to necessarily hate or dread. There were some days where halfway through the practice Wilbur's pain relievers wear off, and he just wishes he could go lay down somewhere dark. Or other times where his head gets fuzzy in the middle of a drill and he's only shocked into awareness by a teammate knocking him against the boards.

Those days were the worst — drifting in and out of his own haze, in pain and tired and sloppy, without a single kind eye turned towards him. Usually, it was easy to push through all of that, but ever since meeting Techno, it ... hasn't.

Wilbur finds himself mad when he's checked, or hurt when his coach brushes him off, or finds himself thinking *that isn't right* whenever his teammates laugh at him for existing.

George never laughs at Quackity like that. Techno never makes fun of Schlatt like that. None of them ever ignore Sapnap.

This, he thinks miserably, is not how a team works.

Day after day, practice after practice, Wilbur feels more and more distant, as if he's watching Hypixal's members from outside of his own body. Observing them like they're an opposing team. He feels it now – what James probably already knew, what Shubble tried to convince him off: he doesn't belong here. This team is for a different kind of person, and every time he takes out Phil's card and turns it over in his hands, he's more convinced of it.

But still, he goes to practice.

Tonight, that was his first mistake.

When he gets in, he's confused. He knows he isn't late, because practice starts at five past six, and it's five fifty, but still, everyone is already there. And weirder still, none of them are in their skates, or practice clothes. They're all just – standing there, waiting.

Wilbur curls a hand around his backpack strap, resisting the weird instinct to step right back out the doors.

His second mistake.

"Oh," his coach exclaims, stepping through his players, "look who's finally decided to show up. Wilbur Soot. You too much of a big shot to look at your texts now? I said come fifteen minutes early. You're *late*."

"I – oh," Wilbur fumbles for his phone to look, but his coach just rolls his eyes. "Sorry, I didn't see –"

"Yeah. Clearly." He turns, and Wilbur goes bright red with shame. "Well, now that you're finally here, we can start. Everyone, gather over here."

Wilbur puts his bag down, shuffling over, confused and embarrassed. His team has never had issues starting things without him before, so why would any of this be different? Is this a meeting? Why would they have to come fifteen minutes early for it?

Why does his coach look almost...giddy?

"We've got some *very* important things to discuss, boys," he starts, pulling out a clipboard. "But first, I want to make sure that I have all my facts straight. Daniels, how long have you been playing for this team?"

"Seven months, sir."

"And you find everything to your liking?" He asks, raising an eyebrow. "There aren't any complaints you'd like to file?"

"No, sir."

"What about you, Walker? How long have you been here?"

"Five months, sir." He grins. "Best five months of my life."

The coach inclines his head, pleased. "What about you, Conway?"

"Half a year, and ready for the next."

"That's what I like to hear," his coach nods. "Loyalty. It's as good as gold here. You cannot expect to reap the benefits of this team without giving yourself over." Horrifyingly, his coach makes eye contact with Wilbur. "*All* the way over."

Wilbur frowns, confused, and his coach fishes a piece of paper out of his pocket. He doesn't flip it over, and Wilbur's confusion only grows.

His coach however, looks at it, his expression contemplative. Whatever he's seeing there intrigues him. Without looking up, he asks, "What about you, Soot?" Wilbur flinches at the shock of being addressed. His mouth opens and closes, unable to find the words. "Hm? How long have you been on this team? How long have you been my player?"

Wilbur, with dread pooling in his gut, takes a breath. "Two years, sir."

"Two years," he repeats. "That's a long time. Hell, that's longer than anyone else on this team. Two years."

Wilbur's cheeks feel like they'll blister under the heat of his own shame. He's going to be sick. Truly sick, right here. There's a shoe dropping and he knows it. Something is coming for him and Wilbur, sickeningly, won't be able to run from it.

"And, tell me Soot, in that entire two years, have you ever once complained?" His coach raises an eyebrow. "Ever said anything? Ever expressed displeasure in my coaching methods or our play style?"

"No," Wilbur whispers. He wouldn't. He *couldn't*.

"Then what," his coach grounds out, raising the paper up, finally, *finally* turning it over to let them all see, "the hell is this?"

Phil's card.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

It must have fallen out of his bag yesterday. He was looking at it, considering, thinking, and when his team starting filing in, he hurried to put it in the bag. He must have been so rushed that he – *fuck*.

"I–"

"And don't you *dare* lie to me."

Wilbur's jaw clicks. His mouth is dry. He doesn't know what to say. He has no idea how to fix this. "A coach gave me his card," he starts shakily. "I wasn't gonna – I didn't want to –"

"Lie." His coach snaps. "If you truly didn't want this, you would've said no. You would've thrown it away the second it was given to you. You would've seen what a disrespect it is to me and everyone who works for this team to take this. To consider this."

Wilbur wants to cry. He didn't mean for *this* to happen. He just liked the idea of an escape. He liked the fantasy of a coach that cared about him past his use.

He just liked the idea of not being hurt too much to let it go.

"Please," Wilbur whispers, "I'm sorry. I am. I didn't mean to –"

"You did." He dismisses. "You think that this team really needs you? That this coach would be willing to put up with you? I've been doing it for two years now and trust me when I say someone who isn't as well-versed as me would *not* have the tolerance. What *use* would you be to them?"

Wilbur's eyes gloss over. And here is it, all the thoughts that he's been trying not to think to himself. Why do they want to help him? Why do they treat him so nicely? What do they *want*? Wilbur's been on this team for two years – at least here he knows what to expect. He shouldn't be selfish.

"Of course you didn't think about that." His coach says, jeering Wilbur out of his own head. He sniffs disapprovingly. "Loyalty is what wins championships. If it needs to be...beat in, then so be it." He pauses. "Practice tonight is optional for you all. I'm going to dinner, maybe rework my roster if it comes to that. Anyone who wants to volunteer to stay and teach Soot what *loyalty* means, please, be my guest."

His coach crumples the card up, and with it, Wilbur's heart. Then, even worse, he leaves, and no one else follows. They all look at him, and Wilbur is horrified to find their expressions *angry*.

"You wanna betray this team for something better, huh Soot?" Conway asks, raising an eyebrow. Wilbur shrinks back. "You think you'll find something better than this?"

"No, I –"

"You think you *deserve* better than this?"

Wilbur can't respond. The breath leaves him when Conway takes a threatening step towards him.

No one stops him.

...

"Cool-down lap," Phil calls, waving an arm in the air. "Let's go fellas! That was some good scrimmaging, I expect to see that energy next weekend when we play!"

All of Phil's players start making their way down the length of the rink at their leisure, talking and laughing. It's nice to hear. He knows things were tense before, but they've seem to begin melding together, united by one common goal. Even if that goal is something as sad as helping a player who is being hurt.

Techno, of course, has been distant, but Phil can't fault him for that. He knows he's guilty of the same thing. Maybe they don't notice it, but Phil did as much research into Hypixal and Wilbur as he could after that tournament.

Two years, Wilbur's been on that roster. By all accounts, he should be that team's captain. He's their longest member, and Phil knows from watching him play that he is very versatile in his skills. Enough that he could probably play any position, switching with little to no warning. He's an ace being used as a mop, and Phil can't put into words how angry that makes him. On *multiple* different levels.

He sighs heavily, moving to tuck his clipboard into his bag. Then, their doors open. Phil looks up, frowning – the rink manager doesn't come in until ten, after they've all cleared out. Any janitors come in after that, so who would –

Oh God.

Wilbur is slumped against the door hinge. His shoulders are shaking and his legs are wobbling and he's tilting like he can't hold himself up. His head is low, so Phil can see his face, but it doesn't matter, because he can imagine good and well what it looks like.

Schlatt is the first one to stumble off the ice, sprinting on his blades over to Wilbur. Just in time to catch his weight before he collapsed to the floor.

"Soot," Schlatt says, frantic, falling to the ground, carefully lowering Wilbur. "Soot, what the fuck – *Wil*." Wilbur doesn't respond but to slump further into Schlatt, as if trying to hide there. "Wilbur, you can't – *Techno! Phil!*"

Phil doesn't remember running over. He doesn't remember falling to his knees at their side. He doesn't remember Techno running over, or the rest of the team swarming them, similarly panicked and loud and worried. All he remembers is Schlatt's shaking hands and pleas for them to *do something – do something please*.

He reaches over and Wilbur flinches from his hands. Phil ignores the sharp pain spiking through him and just cups his jaw, turning his face so Phil can see.

There's a ring around his left eye, and his lip is bleeding, busted. The eye that's open is distant, and Phil very starkly remembers what George said: *dissociation, it's a coping mechanism for pain*.

"Wilbur," Phil says sternly, his voice shaking only a little, "Wilbur, I need your eyes here. Tell me where it hurts."

"What *happened?*" Quackity says, teary. "What the hell happened? He's – He's so –"

"A scrimmage," Sapnap blurts. He sounds like he's having trouble breathing. "It– it has to be a scrimmage. There's no way that these *didn't* come from a game."

"Wilbur," Phil says again, ignoring them. He, even though he doesn't want to, speaks firmly, almost reprimanding. He needs Wilbur to *listen*. If he has a concussion and Phil is just sitting here, waiting … "Wilbur, *listen*."

Wilbur stirs, focuses. "Phil?"

"Wil," he gasps, breath coming in a cloud of relief. "Wilbur, you've got to tell me where it hurts. Exactly where."

Wilbur closes his eyes. "Does it matter?" He asks, despondent. "When it feels better, it'll just hurt all over again. It never stops."

"Soot," Schlatt whispers. He tightens his hold on Wilbur ever-so-slightly, then blanches when Wilbur whimpers in pain. "God, Soot, what the *fuck*?"

"Do you have a headache, Wilbur?" Phil continues. "This is *important*."

Slowly, way too slowly for Phil's liking, Wilbur shakes his head.

"You didn't hit your head?" Again, Wilbur shakes his head. "Okay. Alright, good. We still ought to take you to the hospital and get you checked out but –"

"Here," George, appearing out of nowhere, is holding out an ice pack wrapped with a towel. His jaw is set and his shoulders tight. "For his eye. And anything else. I can get the wrap from our box, but that's all we have."

"Get it," Schlatt snaps, "get it. He fucking needs it."

"Curse at me again, and *you'll* need it," George shoots back.

"George," Phil says sharply. George cows instantly, going to get the wrap without another word.

"I'll get water," Quackity says, shuffling nervously from side to side. "Ice. Water. Both. Um-*mierda*, anything else?"

"Water is good." Quackity rushes off. "Sapnap, go start your car, we'll take that down." Sapnap seems grateful for something to do, because he bounces up, legs jittering anxiously as he goes to grab his keys.

"I can carry him," Schlatt says, and he's learned his lesson because he doesn't hold Wilbur any tighter, just pulling him closer – as close as he can. "Sapnap's car?"

Phil nods tightly, and it takes only three moves for Schlatt to get his legs under them both, scoop Wilbur up and pull close. "Hold onto me, Soot. Just hold on."

Phil waits until they're out of ear-range to turn to Techno. The man is still kneeling, mirroring Phil's position. His expression is slack, open, and the despair in his eyes makes Phil sigh.

This isn't *fair*: For any of them: Wilbur, Schlatt, the boys - Techno.

Techno, who, since Phil's known him, has only known how to give himself over to others completely. Has only known how to care like a boiled over pot. This *has* to be tearing him up inside.

"Tech." Phil says, reaching out and putting a hand on his shoulder. "Techno, I – " he hesitates, trying to find the words. He inhales, then exhales. "I ask a lot of you Tech. Always. I know that. And I'm *sorry* about that, but it's because I trust you and I trust your judgment. You have a very good eye for problems and you are *very* good at giving your trust over to the people that can help."

Techno blinks at him, helpless. The words aren't reaching through the panic, not really. Phil understands.

"You *care*. You care so much that it works against you," Phil continues. "You're panicking right now, and I would never fault you for that, but, dammit Tech, I need you with me. I need you. Your team needs you." He pauses, then adds, "Wilbur needs you."

There's a moment in which Phil doesn't think he's said anything helpful, but then Techno's chest heaves, and his jaw tightens.

"He's got friends we can call," he says. "They – they're his friends from when he was young. They don't play, but they care. They'll have his parent's number. They'll be able to help."

Phil sighs, relieved. "Okay. Okay, good. Good." He moves to stand, getting off his knees. Techno takes another breath, then holds up a hand. Phil pulls him up easily. "You with me, Tech?"

Techno nods, squeezing once. When he speaks, his voice is dark. "I'm with you, Phil."

...

Wilbur comes to a vague sense of awareness somewhere between the parking car and the light shining in his eye.

The doctor – at least, that's what Wilbur assumes he is, judging by the white coat – swings the flashlight away and Wilbur blinks, suddenly able to feel his hands again. Which is unfortunate, considering everything hurts.

As usual.

"No concussion, no head injury." The doctor says. "But it's a miracle, judging by his other injuries. However this happened, someone was very careful to protect his head while the other damage was inflicted."

"Hockey helmets," Phil says, crossing his arms over his chest in concentration. "They're very useful."

Wilbur remembers curling his arms over his head as kicks rained down on him. He remembers biting back his own whimpers so hard that he drew blood. He isn't going to say any of that, though. If they think he was hurt in a hockey scrimmage then –

Then maybe that's for the best.

"I want him off of skates for at least three days from now," the doctor says. "Just to be sure. Keep checking for any signs of wooziness or dizziness or delayed reaction speed, and if you catch any of it, call me."

Phil nods.

Wilbur doesn't know *how* Phil will keep track of that, nor how Phil will keep him off his skates. Phil isn't his coach. Hypixal made that point very, *very* clear. And then they used fist-shaped bruises as their exclamation marks.

"Alright, I'll be back with papers, and then you guys are free to go." He stops right before he opens the door. "Am I correct to assume that all the guys waiting in the lobby are with you?"

Wilbur flushes. Phil nods again. "Yeah, those are my players."

"That's good," he smiles. "It's nice to see you have people who care about you, young man." Wilbur ducks his head. "I'll be back."

He leaves, shutting the door behind him, and Wilbur tenses, apprehensive. He's expecting questions. Questions that Wilbur doesn't know if he can answer. The feeling of a fist cracking against his jaw is fresh in his mind, and if Wilbur is one thing, it's a quick learner when it comes to pain.

"Wilbur," Phil starts. Wilbur holds his breath. "Do you want a hug?"

Wilbur's shoulders hiked up to his ears, dip in surprise. "What?"

"Do you want a hug?" Phil repeats. "If you don't, that's okay, but I'm offering, no strings attached. You just look like you need it."

Wilbur, for the first time since his coach crumpled up his safe haven in his palm without a second thought, feels tears well in his eyes. Uncontrollable tears, with no end in sight. "Please," he gasps, trying not to beg and failing. "Please?"

Phil doesn't rescind his offer, nor does he sneer at Wilbur for the emotion – he just steps forward with open arms. Wilbur slips off the seat and presses close. Phil is gentle, so gentle that Wilbur doesn't know he's being held until he slumps and doesn't fall. He presses his face into Phil's shoulder and sobs.

Phil rubs a hand up and down his back soothingly. Wilbur doesn't know how it doesn't hurt. Wilbur didn't know touch like this could *not* hurt.

"You're okay now," Phil says softly, letting Wilbur shake to pieces in his arms. "I've got you, Wil. Everything will be okay."

But it won't. Not really. His team is Hypixal, and they made it perfectly clear that they're not willing to let him go. Not without it hurting.

Wilbur can only sob harder.

...

Wilbur won't tell them what happened.

Schlatt, personally, doesn't need to know any more than what he's seen. Wilbur, bruised and shaking, falling down on their doorstep as if their practice rink was the only safe place he's ever known. Just from that alone, he's ready to head over and smash his hockey stick over every single Hypixal player he can find.

How could someone be on a *team* and not protect their members with everything in them? If any one of his teammates got knocked around in a game, Schlatt would come barreling from the other side of the ice to get the guy off them. Quackity, Sapnap, even Techno – by joining this team, Schlatt's signed up to make their problems his own and to protect them in any way that he can.

"It had to be a scrimmage," Sapnap keeps saying. "It had to be. How else would he get so hurt?"

"We keep asking this question," Schlatt growls. "We keep fucking asking *how does he get so hurt? How did this happen?* I say that it doesn't fucking matter. At this point, he needs to be with us. Those motherfuckers don't care about him."

"It's that coach." Quackity speaks up. He's sitting on the floor, with his knees up to his chest and his arms wound around them. It looks like his anxiety is eating him from the inside out. Sapnap stops pacing and sits down next to him, knocking their shoulders together. "He encourages all these dangerous plays. Wilbur isn't an angry person. He doesn't even have an ego –"

" – barely has any self-esteem," Sapnap grumbles.

" – he isn't playing rough because he wants to." Quackity finishes. "I don't know why he doesn't just come to our practice."

"What if he tried?" George says suddenly.

They all turn to look at him. He's standing in the corner, arms crossed over his chest. He isn't looking at any of them. His eyes are on the floor – thoughtful. "What if Wilbur tried to come to us? What if they didn't like it?"

"What?" Sapnap blinks. "No. No, that's –"

"Awful," George says. "I know. But think about it: I had to wrap his ankle, and he told me exactly how he got the injury. When we get him ice packs and wraps, he tells us where it hurts and what happened. Wilbur isn't stupid, he knows how dangerous it is to get hurt over and over again. If he isn't telling us what happened, then –"

He stops, and looks up, meeting Techno's eyes.

"Then he isn't telling us for a reason," Techno finishes. George nods solemnly.

"Fuck this!" Schlatt snaps. "Even after *this* Phil won't recruit him?"

"Schlatt." Techno says, voice serious. "Do you trust me?"

Schlatt pauses. "What?"

"Do you *trust* me?"

Schlatt bites his inner cheek, looking over at Sapnap and Quackity sitting together, watching them. He can feel George's eyes trained on his back.

"I do," Schlatt admits. Techno is stern and listens to instructions when they're given and worships the ground that Phil walks on. But he also knows the rules so he can work within them, knows where they can bend, knows just how much to push so nothing breaks.

And he *cares*.

Techno, if Schlatt lets him, will care about him with that same intensity. Techno would be the one crossing the ice to back him up.

"I trust you, Techno."

Techno's jaw sets, he inclines his head slightly. "Alright. And I trust Phil. He won't leave Wilbur over there to suffer. And if he does, I'm going to get him myself, I promise you that."

Schlatt eases. He takes a breath. "Okay. Alright, boss."

"Give me one tournament." Techno says, aloud to them all. "Give me one. I'm ending this."

They all believe him.

At the next tournament, Wilbur has his friends with him.

Shubble and James look exactly the way that Wilbur described them – with her in a tan cardigan, her hair tied with a black bow, and him looking wholly unimpressed with them in his glasses and shirt with a literary pun on it.

"Hockey players," James says when Techno sits down across from them at the table, his team following behind easily. "I hate hockey players."

Wilbur doesn't seem even remotely offended, just tapping James' shin with his ankle. James sighs.

"Hi." He says. "I'm James. I'm Wilbur's best friend."

"And I'm Shubble," Shubble greets, "did you guys know they have cotton candy here? It's in the arcade."

"There's an arcade?" Quackity gasps, eyes bright.

"What is this, a mall?" George says.

"There's a hotel," Wilbur beams, "they've got these little fruit water drink dispensers. They're very cool."

George's expression softens. "Yeah? Maybe we can go get some after these games."

Wilbur shutters a little, his smile dimming, but he nods. "Yeah. Maybe. *Eau de cirtron vert*, is what they have."

"Woah!" Sapnap blinks. "What the fuck was that?"

Wilbur ducks a bit, cheeks pink. James straightens. "French, you idiot."

Sapnap bristles. "I'm not an idiot."

"Well," George starts.

"I'm *not*. I knew it was *French*, I just – since when do you speak French?"

Wilbur shrugs. "I don't know. I taught myself when I was in middle school. Spanish class was too slow for me."

Quackity brightens. "You know Spanish *and* French?"

"He knows Latin too," Shubble says. "And sign language." Wilbur is bright red now, and tugging on her sweater sleeve in embarrassment. "What? I'm your best friend, it's my *job* to brag about you."

"Shubble," Wilbur groans, but Techno shakes his head.

"No, she's right. That's insane, Wilbur." He says. "All I can speak is what Duo Lingo teaches me."

Hesitantly, Wilbur perks. "I could...teach you some. If you wanted. I mean, if you weren't– if you wanted to know."

James glares at Techno, but Techno is already nodding. He doesn't need to be threatened into being nice to Wilbur, even if he appreciates James' sentiment. "Yes please," he says.

"Me too!" Sapnap exclaims. "I want to learn curse words."

"You're literally five." George says blandly.

"Wilbur, how do you say dickhead in French?"

"*Connard.*"

"George, you are one massive *connard.*"

George rolls his eyes. Wilbur laughs.

"Well," he says when he stops laughing. "One of the first things I ever learned were how to say hockey stick and puck. Want to learn that?"

They all nod, and James' protective glare lessens.

They sit there together, letting Wilbur talk about French and how beautiful a language it is, until Sapnap stiffens. Techno frowns, opening his mouth to ask what's wrong, but the man stands abruptly, cutting Wilbur off.

"Uh, hey Wil, hey, how about we all head to get that fruit juice now?" He shifts from foot to foot, restless. Wilbur frowns.

"Sap, are you okay?" Quackity asks, but Sapnap taps his shoulder, then pulls him up too.

"Come with us. You love lemon water. You too Shubble, James. We can learn more French on the way. You were excited about this, yeah Wil? Let's go!"

Techno squints. Something isn't right. He casts his eyes over the food court. There are people all scattered about. Teams together, or players in pairs, or coaches in groups talking over fries. There are some parents and siblings in line for smoothies or pretzels, and people with pizza boxes trying not to trip as they walk past chairs.

Then Techno sees what has Sapnap all rushed to get Wilbur out.

Hypixal is in the line for food – they're rowdy and laughing with each other, all hanging out together without Wilbur.

Ah.

"Maybe you should go," Techno speaks up. "We'll order a pizza while you're gone."

"Are you sure?" Wilbur asks, brows furrowed.

"Yeah," he smiles. "Bring me back a – uh, *eau de citron vert?* Did I get it?"

Wilbur brightens, stunned. "Yeah! You got it! Okay, Tech."

Sapnap hurries them all away from the food court, leaving the three of them sitting there, watching Hypixal pay for their meal.

"What if," Schlatt starts, "I slap that pizza into their face?"

"Don't be ridiculous." George remarks. "Impairing their vision isn't enough. You gotta get their gut. Then they can't breathe."

Schlatt blinks. "You are *terrifying*."

"We're not fighting them." Techno sighs. "Yet."

Schlatt brightens. "I like that *yet*."

"They haven't done anything wrong yet. I need to see it." He edits. "And it has to be in a way where we *could* pin the blame on them."

"Okay, nevermind, *you* terrify me too, what the fuck."

Techno shrugs. The hypixal players come closer. The tallest, broadest one, who's wearing jersey number eleven and is clearly their designated leader, catches sight of the three of them sitting there. He stops.

"Well, if it isn't SMP," he goes, grinning. "You know, we were hoping that we'd run into you at this tournament."

"What, it isn't enough to get blown out by us later?" Schlatt sneers. "You want us to sign your water-bottles now too?"

The guy's expression hardens. He looks ticked off, which Techno won't admit outloud to finding amusement in.

"You better get a leash on your *dog* there, team captain," the man says. Schlatt startles, and all Techno's amusement immediately vanishes.

"*What* did you just call him?"

Number eleven smirks. "Oh come on. Every team has one. A player meant to make everyone else look good. They do what they're told. Fight when they have to, take hits when it counts. Team dogs."

Techno's gaze narrows. "And what? Wilbur is yours?"

"Of course," he laughs. "I mean, as much as you wish he was yours to do what you wish with him, we know a good thing when we've got it."

"Do what you *wish* with him?" George asks, and Techno is grateful, because he can't even speak over the awful sickness curling in his gut. "What the hell does that mean?"

Number eleven's grin stretches sleazily, and he shrugs, glances back at his teammates. They share his expression, all smug pleasure, as if they're remembering something fun.

"Come on," he goes, "you gotta have someone to take your frustrations out on, isn't that right, boys?"

Techno's heart feels still in his chest. "What?"

"Did he not tell you?" He asks, tilting his head in faux innocence. "Oh, Wilbur is very versatile. He makes the *perfect* punching bag – in games and in practice. Sometimes not even playing hockey at all. He just yelps so pretty."

On the table, Schlatt's hands curl into shaking fists. Techno can't even *feel* his hands. The words are just ringing in his ears: *punching bag, punching bag*. Wilbur, who will laugh so hard he bends in half, who tucks himself down into a hug when it's offered, who nervously runs his hands through his hair and marvels over every gentle touch he's given.

His Wilbur, their punching bag.

"It would really suck if we lost our next match, wouldn't it, boys? I mean, who knows what would happen to him on the bus ride home?"

Chairs clatter, and Techno turns, ready to stop Schlatt before he can do something regretful. But it wasn't Schlatt that moved – it was George. In the space it takes Techno to process and blink, George has his fist curled in the player's jersey collar and has him pushed up against the wall, startling some other patrons.

Number eleven's mouth opens and closes in shock, but before he can speak, George presses hard.

"You," he says, voice dangerously soft, "better watch your mouth when referring to my team. And I suggest if you still want your hands, then you keep them to yourself. You touch Wilbur, and I'll know. And trust me, you'll regret it."

The guy gasps, eyes wide, he looks to his team, who are all watching, terrified. Then he looks to, of all people, Techno.

"Get – get this guy *off* of me!"

Techno stares, unimpressed. George presses harder. He makes a little gurgling noise. Only when Schlatt shifts, nervous, does Techno speak up.

"George."

Immediately, George pulls back, letting the guy slump to his feet and grab at his throat.

"You were wrong," George says. "*I'm* the dog. And you better watch your back." Then he turns and Hypixal, who've all just *stood* there, part for him, letting him walk back to them.

"Come on," he says easily, putting a warm hand down on Schlatt's shoulder. He meets Techno's eyes. "Wilbur wanted pizza."

George was right – he *would* know what Techno needed when he needed it, no words necessary.

...

The time for them to play comes too soon.

Wilbur was having fun, more relaxed than he's been in days. Being surrounded by the team and his closest friends made him feel full of a joy he didn't know he had. They wanted to hear everything he had to say and never talked over him or made his interests feel *different*.

His heart was happy, and that's why it hurt so much when the clock neared three thirty and he had to get ready to play.

"It'll be alright, Wil," Quackity promises, bumping the backs of their hands together. On the next swing, he smoothly laces them together, and Wilbur smiles. "After this game, I'm gonna get you this cute hockey puck keychain I saw in the shop on the way in."

"Quackity, are you bribing me to go easy on you guys?" Wilbur asks. "Because I'll have you know, I won't."

They won't let me.

Quackity squeezes his hand gently. "We'd be mad if you didn't."

We know.

Wilbur can't speak over the swell of emotion in his throat. Sapnap, watching them, makes a displeased sound and grabs Wilbur's other hand.

"We're gonna play some hockey, Wilbur. That's it. Just hockey."

"Promise?"

"I promise." Sapnap says. "Just hockey. You will walk away from this game unhurt even if I have to make sure of it myself."

"Thankfully you won't have to," Phil says suddenly, walking in. Wilbur flushes red, ashamed at being caught clinging onto two of his players, but they don't let go and Phil doesn't do anything but smile. "SMP! Get over here."

They all file around, and Wilbur tries to pull away so they can have their talk, but Sapnap holds tighter and Quackity leans on him slightly, keeping him in the circle.

"No playing around tonight, guys," Phil says, voice firm. "We control this game. Every play is ours, every goal is ours, every fight – he looks at Wilbur, – is ours. If something starts on that ice, we are in control. If the score moves, we are the reason. I don't want them to have *anything*. Understand?"

"Are we *trying* to piss them off?" Schlatt frowns.

"With nothing but our skills." Phil answers. "No trash-talk, no dirty plays. I want a clean, hard game. They're going to hit, I need you to take it. For one game, take it. Trust me, after that, I'll handle it."

Schlatt nods once. Sapnap does too.

"Good." Phil grins. He jerks his head over to the side. "Wil, can I speak to you for a moment?"

Wilbur disentangles from Quackity and Sapnap and ducks over to Phil. "Yes?"

"How are you feeling?" Phil asks. "Everything alright?"

"I'm good, sir."

"Phil," he corrects. "You get only one reminder of that."

Wilbur flushes. "Right. Sorry. Phil. Coach."

"Hopefully soon," Phil mutters to himself. Before Wilbur can ask what he means, Phil is reaching forward and grabbing Wilbur's arms. "Wilbur, we're not going to hurt you. You have my word. None of my players will lay a hand against you – in this game, or any other."

Wilbur frowns. "What if I have to –"

"If you do, they still won't," Phil says firmly. He softens. "None of them want to. No matter the circumstances." And then, marvelously, astonishingly, Phil says, "you play your game, Wilbur. *Yours*. No one else's. Show me what you can do."

He turns and walks away, and Wilbur stares at where he just was, eyes brimming with relieved tears. It takes him a moment to remember how to work his limbs, but he does, shuffling over and grabbing his gear and lining up with his team. When he steps out onto the ice, he almost doesn't recognize the feeling. He's so light – so full of air. There's a hope building in him. Dare he think it, but there's something like safety around him, and it isn't coming from the team that he came here with, it's coming from the people lining up across from them.

We're not going to hurt you, Phil said, and Wilbur, giddy with joyous shock, smiles to himself under his helmet.

"What are you smiling about, Wilbur?" Jared asks, voice harsh. Wilbur's smile dims. He curls into himself a little, wishing he could hide. "Excited to get the crap kicked out of you again?" The man leans closer, shielding his movements from anyone's sight with his body. "You got all of the big one's anger last time, but that skinny one can pack a punch – I've seen him go to town on players much bigger than you. I'm excited to see what he can do."

Then, to pack it in, he knocks their shoulders together harshly, and Wilbur's carefully harbored bubble of joy dissipates.

He's never been scared of George before. Not really. Maybe that first game, and maybe the first time they talked, but since then, George was just George – he spoke sparingly, rolled his eyes a lot, and squinted like he needed glasses. He drank only blue drinks, and ended scuffles before they started, and whispered judgmental comments that made Wilbur laugh so hard he snorted. He was just...George. Fluffy hair and crossed arms and deadpan expressions.

Now, Wilbur feels a tinge of fear when he looks across the ice. It's unfair to Phil, he knows, but in Wilbur's experience, coaches aren't the best at reigning in their players. On and off the ice. And it's true – Wilbur has seen what George can do on the ice. He controls himself well, and is very careful. He's selective about who he's rough with, but Wilbur's never been in the favor of consideration.

Techno's promised to always be gentle, but no one else has. At least, not in so many words.

Please, he thinks, the tips of his fingers tingling from how hard he squeezes his stick, please don't hurt me.

The whistle blows. The game starts.

Immediately, SMP score. It's almost clinical. If Wilbur thought they were a great team back when Hypixal first played against them, that's nothing compared to right now. Now, they're one unit, and under their helmets, they're so serious. The puck isn't tangible when it's between SMP's players, and it's very, *very* intimidating.

Another thing: they don't check.

They keep their shoulders in and their heads down, skid before they slam someone against the boards, and let the puck go when it starts getting rough. They slide around conflict like they're made of water, and Wilbur can't *not* watch them, jealous of their ease.

He wants to be a part of that. He wants to work wordlessly and ruthlessly with these people, and somehow still avoid any fight. He wants to *play hockey*.

"Come on Soot," Schlatt says when he gets close, he nudges Wilbur a little – just a fun bump. "Try to keep me from the goal. Play me. Play me."

Wilbur, hesitantly, bumps him back. Schlatt doesn't lash out. Wilbur's grin grows.

When Schlatt tries to get by next time, Wilbur gives chase, reaching in with his stick to swipe at the puck. Schlatt pulls to the left, leaving Wilbur spinning.

"Better luck next time, Soot!" He says, teasing.

Next time, Wilbur wrestles the puck away from him, and Schlatt laughs breathlessly, surprised. It's like they're playing all alone on the ice with the way Schlatt circles his goal just to come back and bother Wilbur. It's how Wilbur would imagine they'd be after practice, or right before, chasing each other around for fun.

And then, he abruptly remembers that they *aren't* in their own little world.

Schlatt gets the puck back, and starts skating away, but then a body slams into him roughly, shoving him against the wall. Wilbur freezes, watching Jared pull back and Schlatt gasp for a breath, completely blind-sided by the hit.

It was unnecessary, it was awful, and Wilbur knew Schlatt knew it. He pushes himself off the wall like he's about to shove Jared, but then he stops himself and looks at Wilbur.

He doesn't hit back.

George skids over, not to win the puck back, but to check on Schlatt – weirdly, Jared flinches away – but George doesn't pay him any mind, patting Schlatt's shoulder twice wordlessly. Schlatt nods, mumbling something, and George nods back.

Schlatt skates away, and George comes closer, patting Wilbur's shoulder too.

"You alright?" He asks. Mutely Wilbur nods. "Having fun?" Again, Wilbur nods. "Good."

Then George skates away.

Wilbur feels silly for ever being scared.

A whistle blows – his coach calling a timeout. They all file over, and Wilbur tries to ignore the way Jared jostles him angrily – it's nothing particularly new.

"Are you done?" His coach asks, staring right at Wilbur.

"I – sorry?"

"Are you done?"

"Done what, sir?"

"Done over there. Playing around. Having fun." Then he slams his clipboard against the bench. "We're *losing*, Soot."

Wilbur flinches. He, out of the corner of his eye, sees the SMP team stir, with one of them – probably Sapnap – jerking forward like he's going to phase right through the glass to get to Wilbur.

"We're losing, and you're laughing – chatting it up." He continues, hissing. "What was it we said about loyalty? Do you need another lesson?"

Wilbur's breath gets caught in his throat. "No," he blurts. "No, please – I'm sorry, I –"

"You know what, you need to get out of this *fantasy* world that you're living in. And if *our* pain isn't enough to do it, then maybe theirs will be."

Jared grins. The other members of Hypixal rumble with agreement. Helplessness claws at Wilbur's insides.

"Coach, please don't –"

"You, Soot, are going to pick one of them to pick a fight with. A *real* fight. No shitty shoving or flopping about. This is a lesson, and if drawing blood is how you learn it, then so be it." And then he adds, "Or, I'll be taking your jersey."

Wilbur blanches. *Take his jersey?* But that's all he *has*. That's the only proof that he has that he's on a team. That he isn't alone. That and...the bruises.

"What'll it be, Wilbur?" His coach asks. "Are you gonna listen to what I say the way that you're supposed to? Or will I have to find someone else who can do your job twice as well?"

Will you get hurt the way you're meant to? Will you suffer like you're supposed to?

"Yes," Wilbur says shakily. "Yes, sir."

The whistle blows again, and Wilbur doesn't remember moving, but soon he's back on the ice, helmet on, hands trembling. *Who?* Is all he can think – *how?* Phil said that none of them would fight back. That none of them would want to. Even if he had to, they wouldn't take the bait.

His coach won't be satisfied with him saying *they just weren't angry enough.*

He needs someone to draw blood. Just – put him down on the ice. That's it. Just so he can keep his future. He's worked his whole life to be here, he can't just throw it away.

Techno skates over, eyes worried. "Wil? Wil, are you alright?" His voice is so gentle, so soft. It makes Wilbur ache. He longs for just a half an hour ago when he was sitting across from them all listening to them butcher French.

Wilbur reaches out and clings to Techno's jersey. "Tech. Techno. Just once. I need you to hit me just once."

"*What?*"

Wilbur dips his head slightly. He can't let Techno see his eyes— if Techno sees how terrified he is of getting hurt, then he won't do it. "*Please* Techno. Please. Just – just hit me hard enough to take me out. Just for the game. And then you guys can play clean and under control like you want. Please. I need this jersey. I – I don't know how to do anything else."

"Wilbur, what are you –"

"Techno," Wilbur breathes, desperate, "if you cared about me at all, you'd do this for me."

"You're asking me to hurt you, Wil," Techno says, horrified, "I can't – I care about you *too* much to just –" he stops himself. He takes a deep, steady breath, his eyes closing. A whistle blows, and Techno opens his eyes, his eyes hard. "Alright Wilbur."

He pulls away, and Wilbur watches him go, a terror in his gut so strong that it makes him feel sick. Techno is going to hit him. Wilbur will go down and he won't have to play the rest of the match. Hell, he might not even be up for the rest of the day. He can rest.

It'll hurt – *God, it'll hurt* – but after, Wilbur won't feel anything. And honestly, does it really matter? What's the difference? He always hurts.

On the other side of the ice, Techno calls for George and Wilbur looks away, every part of him bracing in the familiar feeling of anticipated pain.

The whistle blows. The game restarts.

Wilbur stalls for a little, wishing that Schlatt would come over and distract him, or that George will come over and pin him with that intense gaze and make him confess everything. He wishes Phil would come out onto the ice in his sneakers and stop the match, pull away and take Wilbur with him.

They don't.

Wilbur plays, timid, and SMP continues crushing them. As the clock ticks down, Wilbur can feel his team's anger build around him. His coach stalks back and forth in front of the bench, and Wilbur knows that agitation is reserved mainly for him.

Jared skates by, pissed, knocking into him, and Techno catches him before he hits the ice. Wilbur is steadied carefully by Techno's hands and realizes that this, over anything, is his best chance.

"Sorry, Tech," he whispers, then shoves the man. "Hey! Get the *fuck* off me."

Techno slides back, watching Wilbur, expression blank. *Please*, he thinks, going in again. "Who do you think you are?"

"Stop," Techno says loudly. He doesn't hit back though. "Stop it."

"What will you do if I don't, huh?" Wilbur rips his helmet off. His coach wants to see blood. This is the easiest way to give it to him.

Techno pauses a moment, and Wilbur feels the air shift. He braces, knowing what's coming, but even still, Techno manages to surprise him.

"Play dead," he whispers, just before he cocks back his arms and throws it forward towards Wilbur's face.

Wilbur's flinch is real, scared of any fists coming his way even if he trusts the person throwing them, but as Techno carefully calculated, the hit doesn't land. Wilbur still falls, off balance and playing dead as he was told.

He trusts Techno.

He trusts Techno, so he keeps his eyes closed.

He keeps them closed even as he hears gasps from the crowd and the shrieking whistle from the referee. He keeps them closed even as he feels people shift around him and above him. He keeps them closed when he hears Sapnap yelling and Quackity's worried, quick speech.

He keeps them closed when hands pass over his chest and his pulse, and then familiar arms curl around him and pick him up.

He drifts a little, the leftover panic and fear and tension too much to process as it goes. He feels fuzzy, almost as if he *did* get hit and is trying to block the pain out. Wilbur is aware enough to notice when the noise level is abruptly cut in half, but other than that –

And then, as if he was heard, hands slip into his and squeeze in a familiar pattern. Wilbur inhales sharply, opening his eyes and letting the world dial into focus. The first thing he sees are George's eyes.

"Good." He says. "He didn't kill you. That would've sucked."

"What?" Wilbur asks clumsily.

"Because if he did, I would've had to kill *him* ." He sighs. "And honestly, I'm just too tired for that right now."

Wilbur takes another deep breath. He's panicking just a little. The slightest bit. George squeezes his hands again.

"Wilbur, you're okay. We're in the trainers because everyone thinks that Techno knocked you out cold." He explains. "Schlatt carried you in. You're safe. No one you don't want in here is coming in those doors, alright? You're with me."

Wilbur's chest loosens. "O – oh."

"Yeah. Are you hurt anywhere? We did our best to make sure they too busy playing us to do anything, but – "

"No," Wilbur says. He's stunned. "No, I'm okay. I'm not hurt."

"Good."

The doorknob behind George jiggles, and he immediately pulls away, turning and squaring his shoulders. Wilbur ducks a bit, feeling oddly safe behind the man. George *is* dangerous – Jared certainly seems to think so. If George has decided that he is worth protecting, then Wilbur knows nothing and no one will get him as long as he's behind the man.

"George, you fuckass, you locked the *door*."

Sapnap.

Wilbur blinks. George deflates, sighing heavily. He rolls his eyes up to the ceiling before yanking the door open. Sapnap and Quackity spill into the room, talking loudly, over themselves. They push past George and over to Wilbur.

"Oh my God, Wilbur, are you alright?" Quackity's fluttering hands find his wrists. "You went down so hard I thought – fuck, I thought you actually blacked out."

"Maybe next time Techno could give just a little warning," Sapnap grumbles. Even as he complains, he reaches over and pulls Wilbur *and* Quackity into a hug. "I swear to God I was about to run him over right there."

"You think Techno would actually hit Wilbur?" George asks, unimpressed.

"No, which is why I was so fucking angry," he says. Wilbur hugs back, still too shocked to speak. "But everything is back to normal. Well – I mean, I don't think we're ever going to be invited back to this tournament, but you know."

That does it. "What?" Wilbur pulls away. "What do you mean?"

"Techno is uh – well, he's in trouble for *knocking you out*. But, don't worry, he's also getting Hypixel kicked out too. Schlatt's helping." Quackity answers. When Wilbur glances at George for confirmation, George is nodding.

"*What?*"

"Don't worry." Sapnap grins. "It's all part of the plan."

"Who's plan?"

Quackity winces. "... Schlatt."

"You – and you expect me not to worry?"

"Ah, see," Sapnap points. "He's catching on. Again, don't worry: Techno signed off on it. Them working together instead of against each other is a little terrifying to tell you the truth. You'll just have to remember to never go along with Schlatt's plans when it's just him. That's important information to have in order to survive here."

"Survive? Survive where?"

"Don't overwhelm him." Quackity says suddenly.

"I'm not overwhelming him!"

"You totally are." George sighs.

"Hey! I'll have you know that I am *very* underwhelming! ...oh, wait –"

"No, no, you were right, keep going," George tilts his head. Sapnap flushes.

Quackity pats him on the arm. "Don't sell yourself too short now, you're perfectly whelming enough when you want to be."

Sapnap beams. Wilbur is still confused.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Remember when Phil gave you his card?" George asks, kneeling back down in front of Wilbur and covering his hands with his own. "Well, we'd like to make that official. We want you on our team. If that's something you want." George squeezes gently – not pressuring, just supportive.

They go quiet, watching him.

Wilbur, distressed, can only say, "what?"

"Fuck." Sapnap curses. "We broke him. Techno is gonna be pissed."

Quackity steps over, and carefully puts a hand over George's and Wilbur's. "Wil, to put it nicely, your team sucks. And we're better. We want you with us."

Wilbur stares.

"We're taking you. And we're not taking no for an answer." Sapnap says, grinning.

Wilbur opens his mouth, but before he can say anything, the door opens again, and in comes Phil. Techno and Schlatt follow close behind. "Actually, we *are* taking no for an answer. What do we say about consent boys?"

All together, as if rehearsed, they go, "consent is king."

Wilbur feels lightheaded. And dizzy. Maybe he *did* get hit on the way down. "What?" He whispers again, feeling like he's on drugs. He moves to pinch himself, but Techno stops him, pulling his own hand away gently.

"Ah-ah, no more bruises. You deserve better than that, Wilbur."

Schlatt comes up on his other side and puts a hand on his back, rubbing soothingly. Wilbur slowly eases back into the touch. "Yeah, and it would be nice if you could say yes, cause we're actually not supposed to be in the building anymore. We kinda got kicked out."

"You didn't have to threaten the ref," Techno sighs, though he doesn't seem all that disappointed.

"I definitely *did*," Schlatt huffs. "What kind of sane person tries to keep playing in a game when someone has been knocked out? Even if they're on the other team, I'm not gonna just pretend it didn't *happen*. And besides, of course I had to. George wasn't there."

George smiles, his glasses glinting dangerously.

"Are you overwhelmed, mate?" Phil asks him kindly.

Wilbur nods mutely and Techno, still holding his hand, pulls back a bit, giving him space. He keeps holding on though, and even more, his thumb rubs gently at the spot that Wilbur was pinching, at the fragile skin there. Schlatt stubbornly doesn't move, and Wilbur can't deny feeling immensely grateful about it.

"You ... you *ah-ah-* ed me."

Techno turns red. "Well. That was – I just –" He can't find the words to defend himself and just winces. "Okay, that might have been a bit much, huh?"

Wilbur watches him, and then slowly, his own face breaks out into a smile. Shaky and small, but there. "Maybe a bit. I guess I didn't mind too much."

"That," Sapnap stage whispers, "sounds like a yes."

"You," George says back, "sound like an idiot."

"I want to." Wilbur says, startling even himself. "I want to leave. but you guys are so - - and I'm just- - ... you know?"

George stares. "Wilbur, you haven't said anything yet.

"You aren't just anything!" Quackity protests.

"Just kind," Phil starts, "just hurting, just intelligent. And, of course, just very, very good at hockey."

"And not being played correctly." Techno adds.

"That's right – if I was a coach and put a player as dynamic as you in... I don't know, the goal, then I'd be fired on my first day in the NHL. Them using you as a human shield to hide behind is terrible coaching, awful hockey, and *not* how a team works. You are capable of more, and joining SMP is your option to have that."

There's a pause.

"Of course, you don't have to say yes now." Phil says. "Or at all. We just want to leave you with this offer."

Slowly, Wilbur nods.

"Wait." Sapnap startles. "Leave him?"

"He didn't come up here with us, Sapnap. We can't just kidnap him."

"Says *who*?"

"The law."

But instead of Phil's logic soothing them, it only works to panic them more. Even George is unsettled, shifting from foot to foot like he wishes he could do something.

Wilbur, personally, understands. He wouldn't say that he's happy about it– he's resigned more than anything, but he knows that this is necessary. There's a yearning deep inside too – he's scared, of course, knowing the anger that waits for him back at Hypixal, knowing the pain that might be coming, but – for this? For this team? Anything.

"No." Schlatt says.

"...no?" Phil frowns.

"No. No, you can't send him back. You can't –"

Phil sighs. "Schlatt," he starts, but Schlatt doesn't give him the chance to finish.

"No," he says again, and he doesn't sound angry, or indignant. He sounds panicked. Frantic. *Afraid.* "I know. I know. I – I make things difficult and I argue when I don't have to and I keep trying to test all your boundaries and – I know. I know, but this isn't – I'm not –" He makes a frustrated noise. Then, unable to find the words, he turns to Techno, eyes wide, pleading. "Techno. Please. They'll hurt him."

Techno hesitates.

"Captain," Schlatt gasps, "*please.*"

Immediately, Techno turns. "Phil, Hypixel said some...pretty *horrible* stuff to us before the game." Phil's brows furrow, listening. "About him, about what they would do to him if they lost. If we send him back, then...well, I don't know if he'll come back."

Phil pales. The rest of them gasp. George's jaw clenches so tight that it looks like it'll pop.

Wilbur, however, just sighs. He's not surprised. He wishes he was, he wishes he thought that his team cared about him for something other than their own violent stress-relief, but he gave up on that a long time ago. Thinking that they genuinely cared about him was the real fantasy.

"Okay," Phil says, disturbed. "I hear you. That definitely changes things." He looks at Wilbur. "Wil, what is it that you want to do?"

"I..." He closes his mouth. Opens it again. Flexes his unhurt fingers. "I don't want to be hurt again," he admits softly. "Please. If – if you can. If not, then I can just – I'll be okay, but. I want to try."

Phil looks like he's been sliced open. "Of course. Of course, Wil. Fuck, you shouldn't have to ask for that." He inhales deeply. "Okay, you come home on our bus. I'll take whatever consequences come my way."

Wilbur feels relief wash over him so strong that he nearly passes out. Schlatt releases the breath he was holding and leans over, bowing his head and pressing his face into Wilbur's shoulder. Wilbur bites back tears, reaching up and winding his arms around him tight.

"Thank you," he whispers. Even though his voice is quiet, it reaches them all. "Thank you."

"There is no need to thank us for keeping you safe," Phil says. "Not at all."

...

Schlatt hasn't moved from Wilbur's side since the trainers.

Wilbur was checked out, given the all clear, and ducked away to call Shubble and James to let them know where he was and what was going on, and Schlatt followed, just lingering a

little bit away. He gave Wilbur the privacy he needed, but stayed close to *also* offer him safety.

"Schlatt?" Wilbur calls, tucking his phone in his pocket. James yelled himself out quite a bit with worry, and tried to threaten Techno, but when Wilbur explained, he calmed down and promised to meet Wilbur at home.

"Soot," Schlatt says, pushing himself off the wall and coming close. "You alright?"

Wilbur doesn't nod. He doesn't say anything. He pulls Schlatt into a hug, burying his face in the man's hoodie. Schlatt automatically holds him back, and keeps holding him. There aren't any words, because no words are necessary.

...

Later, after they've filed onto the bus and ushered Wilbur into the back, right between Techno and Schlatt, Wilbur feels the need to comment on it.

Quackity passed around snacks and Gatorade and Sapnap pulled off his own hoodie and shoved it at Wilbur. *I do not want to stare at the Hypixel jersey this whole ride.* He said. *Please put this on – you're gonna have to get used to SMP colors anyway.*

Wilbur didn't need to be told twice.

He was comfortable, warm, safe, and *tired*, but there was something stopping him from sleeping – something lingering in his mind that he felt the need to address.

"You could've just hit me," he says. Techno, who's eyes had been slipping shut, blinks to awareness. "That would've been the easy thing to do."

A frown creases Techno's face. "Easy? You think seeing you hurt is easy for me? Wilbur, watching you be in pain is the hardest thing I think I've ever done." He shifts, sitting up. "I promised to never hurt you. I promised to always be gentle with you. I'm not one to go around breaking my promises."

Wilbur feels thrown. "You mean it? You'll never hurt me?"

"Not if I can help it," Techno promises. "And trust me, Wilbur – I can help it."

They take Wilbur home, watch him embrace Shubble and James on the sidewalk, and wave as they pull away. Phil tells all his players to *go home, get some rest, practice on Monday is canceled.*

When Techno asks why, Phil just pats his shoulder. *Because you all deserve a break.*

But in reality, that's a lie.

Let's talk, Phil says into his phone, to Hypixel's coach later that night.

Why? He huffs. You wanna talk about the fact that you abducted one of my players? You want to tell me where the hell Soot is?

Phil takes a controlled breath. *I just think we should clear the air. Get on the same page. Monday night. I'll come to your rink.*

Fine, he says, gruff. Six. Don't be late.

Phil isn't.

He's walking in through the rink doors at five fifty nine. There are the sounds of skaters on the ice, a puck being hit, the laughter of guys – Phil knows without looking that it's Hypixal.

How cute, their coach still thinks they'll be able to have practice after this. Aw.

Phil finds his office easily and just barely remembers his manners, knocking on the door before going inside. The coach is sitting at his desk, a roster in front of him.

"You can sit there," he says, pointing to the chair on the other side. Phil sits. "So, what did you want to *talk* about, SMP? That debacle of a last tournament? Our last game? Our *first* game? Which one – take your pick."

"None of that." Phil smiles thinly. "I want to talk about Wilbur Soot."

The coach raises his eyebrows. "Oh, bold. You came here to tell me to my face that you poached my player? Do none of you people over there know what respect is?"

"Oh I know what respect is just fine," Phil's smile grows. "And I give it to those deserving."

The coach glares.

"But no," Phil continues, waving casually, "no, I'm not here to talk about Wilbur's transfer. That will come later, trust me. What I'm here to talk about is Wilbur's injuries."

The coach freezes, then relaxes. "Oh yeah? He's a clumsy little fucker, isn't he? Always getting bumped. You know, it really is unfortunate, because he's quite the *hot-head*. Never knows when to let stuff on the ice go."

Phil's smile melts. "He fights a lot, yes. He has injuries after games, after tournaments, after scrimmages. It's only natural on the ice. It's a rough sport, and opponents are very high energy, low caution. They don't care who they hurt, all they see is a jersey that isn't their own." Then, Phil leans forward. "No, I understand all of that. What I'm curious about are the injuries after *practices*."

"Did Soot complain about a few hard hits in practice?" He asks, dismissive. "We're training to play against championship teams. Like you said, they'll only see a jersey, it's my job to prepare my boys for that."

Phil's eye twitches. *My boys.* He keeps calm. Slow and steady wins the race. This is for Wilbur.

"Wilbur didn't complain," Phil corrects. "At all actually. Hardly mentioned your practices, your methods, your championships. If you have such a thing." The coach blisters, but Phil plunders on, "What happened was, three weeks ago, at the end of my practice, Wilbur came to me, bruised, bleeding. He didn't say a word about where the injuries came from, but I can recognize the end of a hockey stick when I see it imprinted in someone's *skin*. I *also* know there were no tournaments going on that week."

The coach grins, smug. "What can I say, SMP? Poaching isn't cute. Ultimately it's the players who suffer because of it." He shifts in his chair, satisfied with himself. "It's my job to keep my team from caving in under disloyalty. And besides, I didn't tell them to do anything, they just care *so much* about this team. It's refreshing really, the lengths they're willing to go to for each other."

"You're sick," Phil remarks.

"Really?" He hisses, angry now. "I could say the same thing about a man who tries to strip a team of what little it has."

Phil adjusts the file under his arm. He stands. "Well, let me put you out of your misery, then." He drops the thick manila on the desk, right over the man's shitty roster. "This is documentation of every single injury that Wilbur has received in his entire two years on Hypixal. Take it, read it, get yourself familiar with it. Burn it if you want, it doesn't matter, I have copies, and I've sent them to the CHF along with my case against your harmful coaching and your unsportsmanlike team."

The coach's smug expression finally drops. He stares at the file like he's just come up from underwater. "You – wh –"

"Two years is a long time." Phil says, smiling. "And you have hurt him enough. You, if I'm familiar with the rules of this association – and *trust me, I am* – won't coach for as long as this investigation takes place. And if you're found guilty, which you will be, then your team will be disbanded and your license revoked. It will take five years for you to even challenge the notion, and an additional five every time after your plea is denied." Phil's smile fades. He leans forward, placing his hands on the desk, and locking eyes with the man. "And I will be there at every single hearing, every five years, until you stop trying. If you think two years isn't loyal enough, you'll be *very* satisfied with the decade I am willing to put into seeing you *burn*."

The coach gapes. Phil straightens, smiling. "Thank you for your time, coach. I suggest that you go tell *your boys* the news. They'll be quite devastated to hear that the team they *fought so hard for* was taken down by the one person that encouraged them to fight in the first place."

He moves to step back, and is almost caught off guard when the coach surges up, face caught in a snarl, reaching for Phil. Phil moves easily, side-stepping, spinning and putting a hand on the back of the coach's neck and, using his continued momentum, slamming the man's face into his own wall.

Phil holds him there for a moment. "I want you to remember this feeling for the rest of your life. This is how Wilbur felt every day that he spent under your care. And this is just a fraction of the pain he suffered. If I was a different man, I'd lock this door and make you feel it all. Luckily for you, I have too much to lose." He leans closer, pressing hard, whispering in the man's ears. "If you come near any of my players ever again, you'll be *wishing* I was this nice."

Phil steps back, letting him go. He crumples, crying pathetically, and Phil, light as air, leaves the Hypixal practice rink.

And James, who once, if you remember, had been the safest and loneliest boy that you could find, now had all the friends and playmates in the world.

- Roald Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*

...

Our last game against your team was a blow out, Phil says gently, nine to zero. We played completely clean, using only skill. We kept our cool and we didn't fight back even when they hit us. Wilbur, to anyone that's watching, your transfer to us is a perfectly logical decision.

What? Wilbur frowns. *You – you did that for me?*

Of course. No one in their right mind would blame a player for seeking better. Sports are about learning, and if you want me, I will teach you and keep you safe for as long as you like.

As long as I like?

Two years, two months, two weeks. Wilbur, I'll take whatever time you want to give me. And if you find something better, I would never penalize you for chasing it. More than anything, Wil, you're free.

When Wilbur sobs, relieved, Phil reaches out slowly, and envelops him in a hug.

...

"We gotta start practice," Sapnap murmurs, but Techno can tell that his heart isn't in it. His eyes, just like all of theirs, are on the door. Waiting.

"I know," Techno sighs. Phil doesn't yell at them to line up though – he's got his arms crossed over his chest, waiting patiently. "Coach, do you think –"

"He'll be here." Phil says. "Give him a moment."

They wait restlessly. The clock passes six. Five minutes, then ten, then fifteen. Phil's expression doesn't change, not in any way that Techno can see. Schlatt starts skating back and forth and Quackity fiddles with his stick.

They wait.

When the clock hits six thirty, Phil sighs, and Techno feels something inside of him curl up – it hurts.

"Alright," Phil says, dispassionate even as he raises his voice, "come on. Get on the line for warm ups."

Techno aches. Schlatt juts his skate blade against the ice sharply.

Then, the door bangs open.

Wilbur comes in, a helmet under his arm, his hair a mess, his jersey on *backwards*. "Oh my God, oh my God – I'm so sorry, I fucking – I fell asleep, I thought – I set seven alarms, I swear, but none of them worked!"

Phil staggers back, expression breaking open in relief. Techno laughs breathlessly, overjoyed. Schlatt stares, his mouth wide open, the corners of it curling up slowly.

"And *then*, I got lost and I don't know how I managed to go to a *pizza parlor* instead of a hockey rink and –" Wilbur sets his bag down, his nervous rambles petering out. His cheeks, already pink, turn red. "I'm sorry, coach. It won't happen again, I promise."

Phil attempts to school his expression, but they all can see the endeared smile peeking through. "No problem, Wil. Just lace up your skates. We're doing warm ups."

Wilbur ducks his head, but he's smiling too.

Techno looks away, meeting Schlatt's eyes. Schlatt, grinning, mouths something his way.

Thank you.

Weeks pass, and a million little milestones along with them.

Wilbur unhunching, smiling, talking to them nonstop about languages and music and foods and countries.

Him trusting them. His bandaids and bruises disappearing, his skills developing now that he actually gets the chance to work on them. He scores his first, painless goal in a game in what has probably been *months* and nearly cries right there on the ice – they all see the tears when they move to congratulate him, and they're all just as moved as him.

Wilbur goes over to Quackity's house for breakfast, he goes over to George's for dinner, he helps Sapnap try to set Phil up on a date, and runs laps with him when Phil finds out. He lets himself be tucked under Techno's arm, and drapes himself over Schlatt's without a care to the consequences.

Of course, the most that ever happens is Schlatt sighing loudly, then shifting so Wilbur is comfortable, with the man so used to Wilbur's weight by now that it may as well be his own.

The medals grow, and Phil personally hand delivers new jersey after new jersey, each with a verbal reminder that it will not be taken away because Wilbur doesn't do things that make him uncomfortable.

Every single time without fail, Wilbur's eyes well up with fresh, happy tears.

He sleeps in hotel rooms with Techno, or Schlatt, or George, and never stirs, is never anxious about anyone hurting him. He's pulled into the food courts and swimming pools and gift shops. He's given hug, after hug, after hug.

The news of Hypixal being disbanded comes right after the news of Wilbur's old coach getting his license revoked, and Sapnap decides that they *have* to celebrate by going out to dinner.

"So," James goes, sitting in the booth next to Wilbur, watching his teammates argue over a platter of calamari. "Hockey friends."

Wilbur eats a cherry from his drink with a giddy grin. "Hockey friends. Real, true, hockey friends."

James, begrudgingly, sighs. "I guess I can tolerate them. They're gonna be around forever?"

Wilbur leans over against James' shoulder, teary already and only slightly tipsy. He's just a bit too warm in his SMP jacket, but he doesn't dare to take it off. "Yeah, I think so." He pauses, sniffing. "God, I hope so."

James smiles, just for Wilbur. "Good." He says softly. "You deserve it."

End Notes

ice Wilbur can be summed up with one song: bite the hand by julien baker <3

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